

*The* SPIRIT of  
AMERICAN  
LITERATURE



JOHN MACY









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AMERICAN LITERATURE**



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# THE SPIRIT OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY *Albert*  
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## PREFACE

IN THIS BOOK something is said about most, if not quite all, of the emergent figures in American literature; an attempt is made to survey the four corners of the national library and to give an impression of its shape and size. It is hoped that the attempt may have resulted in a fairly adequate review or introduction for the student, and that it may be not uninteresting to those who, students or not, like to listen to talk about books. If its purpose is approximately realized, this volume will be found to be a little nearer to a collection of appreciative essays than to a formal history or bibliographic manual, and to be at the same time inclusive to a degree that the genuine essayist would instinctively avoid.

The true essayist is a privileged person. He may write fifty pages about Hawthorne and not write about Longfellow at all; he wilfully elects whom he will discuss. Such liberty is here subdued to the general consensus of opinion as to what men of letters are important. Some privilege, however, is assumed. Individual preference, rather than the impersonal judgment of critical Authority, accounts for the fact that Bryant, Mrs. Stowe, and Bret Harte are not signalized by separate chapters, whereas there are chapters on William James and Mr. Henry James. If this be a disproportion, it

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may help to restore harmony in the universe by balancing a disproportion on the other side which I find in some hand-books and histories.

The historian is subservient to an ideal of encyclopedic completeness and to traditional values. He rules literature off in sections; into each school and period he puts the great men, and then stuffs the chinks with such as N. P. Willis and Margaret Fuller, who may have been admirable persons but omitted to make literature. Life is short, and art, even American art, is long and vital. It is perplexing to find in current manuals no mention of Father Tabb, but a full page about Anne Bradstreet; a chapter on Bryant, but only a page about Sidney Lanier; extended accounts of Charles Brockden Brown and William Gilmore Simms, but only half a page about Mark Twain. To be sure, the historian avowedly and properly puts emphasis on writers who are dead in the flesh, and finishes off his contemporaries briefly because they are not yet established and are too numerous to mention. But it seems well, in books about literature, not to discuss writers admittedly dead in the spirit, whose names persist by the inertia of reputation.

No man's sense of what is important will agree exactly with his neighbour's judgment; moreover, it is risky for one who is making a book to hint defects in other works on the same subject. All that I wish to plead is that a living lion is better than a dead mouse. If we should have another chapter about a poet, it should treat not Bayard Taylor, nor Bryant, but James Whitcomb Riley or Father Tabb. That any one should question a chapter about William James in

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a book in which a chapter on that dreadful bore, Jonathan Edwards, would pass unchallenged, seems to be a perversion of literary values. If we should have a chapter on Bret Harte (as well we might), then we should have chapters about two very much better story-tellers — Sarah Orne Jewett and Mrs. Mary Wilkins-Freeman. There is, I am confident, only one first-rate man of letters of the elder days who is not discussed in the following pages — Francis Parkman. The omission is due not to lack of admiration for his thrilling and finely written books, but to my inability to enter the field of purely historical work with any sureness or illusion of authority.

If, as I believe, accepted handbooks and histories of American literature pay too much attention to doubly dead worthies, whose books are not interesting, and miss or but timidly acknowledge contemporary excellence, there is a way of accounting for it. Every generation, except the more independent spirits in it, looks with too Chinese reverence upon its ancestors. Moreover, the passing generation of American writers, critics and professors, the men who wrote the prevalent handbooks, are intellectually a poor generation as compared with their fathers. They have reason to lack confidence in their contemporaries. The other day they drew up a list of their living selves. The National Institute of Arts and Letters announced the Forty American Immortals, the first roster of an absurd Yankee imitation of the French Academy. Twenty-eight men, "chosen from among the greatest living American writers" (that is, of course, men past middle age), were elected to immortality on the score

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of literary achievement. On the roll are exactly three men who have made literature—Mr. Henry James, Mr. Howells, and Mr. James Whitcomb Riley. The list is well chosen; there is no other genius that one would nominate for a place in it, except Mrs. Wharton and Mrs. Freeman, who cannot be admitted because they are women. The list (except for two or three distinguished men who are dead) represents American literature for the last thirty or forty years. *Morituros salutamus!*

WRENTHAM, April 26, 1912.

J. M.



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THE SPIRIT OF  
AMERICAN LITERATURE





## CHAPTER I

### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

AMERICAN literature is a branch of English literature, as truly as are English books written in Scotland or South Africa. Our literature lies almost entirely in the nineteenth century when the ideas and books of the western world were freely interchanged among the nations and became accessible to an increasing number of readers. In literature nationality is determined by language rather than by blood or geography. M. Maeterlinck, born a subject of King Leopold, belongs to French literature. Mr. Joseph Conrad, born in Poland, is already an English classic. Geography, much less important in the nineteenth century than before, was never, among modern European nations, so important as we sometimes are asked to believe. Of the ancestors of English literature "Beowulf" is scarcely more significant, and rather less graceful, than our tree-inhabiting forebears with prehensile toes; the true progenitors of English literature are Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian, and French.

American literature and English literature of the nineteenth century are parallel derivatives from preceding centuries of English literature. Literature is a succession of books from books. Artistic expression springs from life ultimately but not immediately. It may be likened to a

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river which is swollen throughout its course by new tributaries and by the seepages of its banks; it reflects the life through which it flows, taking colour from the shores; the shores modify it, but its power and volume descend from distant headwaters and affluents far up stream. Or it may be likened to the race-life which our food nourishes or impoverishes, which our individual circumstances foster or damage, but which flows on through us, strangely impersonal and beyond our power to kill or create.

It is well for a writer to say: "Away with books! I will draw my inspiration from life!" For we have too many books that are simply better books diluted by John Smith. At the same time, literature is not born spontaneously out of life. Every book has its literary parentage, and students find it so easy to trace genealogies that much criticism reads like an Old Testament chapter of "begats." Every novel was suckled at the breasts of older novels, and great mothers are often prolific of anæmic offspring. The stock falls off and revives, goes a-wandering, and returns like a prodigal. The family records get blurred. But of the main fact of descent there is no doubt.

American literature is English literature made in this country. Its nineteenth-century characteristics are evident and can be analyzed and discussed with some degree of certainty. Its "American" characteristics — no critic that I know has ever given a good account of them. You can define certain peculiarities of American politics, American agriculture, American public schools, even American religion. But what is uniquely American in American literature? A Poe

is just as American as Mark Twain; Lanier is just as American as Whittier. The American spirit in literature is a myth, like American valour in war, which is precisely like the valour of Italians and Japanese. The American, deluded by a falsely idealized image which he calls America, can say that the purity of Longfellow represents the purity of American home life. An Irish Englishman, Mr. Bernard Shaw, with another falsely idealized image of America, surprised that a fact does not fit his image, can ask: "What is Poe doing in that galley?" There is no answer. You never can tell. Poe could not help it. He was born in Boston, and lived in Richmond, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia. Professor Van Dyke says that Poe was a maker of "decidedly un-American cameos," but I do not understand what that means. Facts are uncomfortable consorts of prejudices and emotional generalities; they spoil domestic peace, and when there is a separation they sit solid at home while the other party goes. Irving, a shy, sensitive gentleman, who wrote with fastidious care, said: "It has been a matter of marvel, to European readers, that a man from the wilds of America should express himself in tolerable English." It is a matter of marvel, just as it is a marvel that Blake and Keats flowered in the brutal city of London a hundred years ago.

The literary mind is strengthened and nurtured, is influenced and mastered, by the accumulated riches of literature. In the last century the strongest thinkers in our language were Englishmen, and not only the traditional but the contemporary influences on our thinkers and artists were British. This may account for one negative characteristic

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of American literature — its lack of American quality. True, our records must reflect our life. Our poets, enamoured of nightingales and Persian gardens, have not altogether forgotten the mocking-bird and the woods of Maine. Fiction, written by inhabitants of New York, Ohio, and Massachusetts, does tell us something of the ways of life in those mighty commonwealths, just as English fiction written by Lancashire men about Lancashire people is saturated with the dialect, the local habits and scenery of that county. But wherever an English-speaking man of imagination may dwell, in Dorset or Calcutta or Indianapolis, he is subject to the strong arm of the empire of English literature; he cannot escape it; it tears him out of his obscure bed and makes a happy slave of him. He is assigned to the department of the service for which his gifts qualify him, and his special education is undertaken by drill-masters and captains who hail from provinces far from his birthplace.

Dickens, who writes of London, influences Bret Harte, who writes of California, and Bret Harte influences Kipling, who writes of India. Each is intensely local in subject matter. The affinity between them is a matter of temperament, manifested, for example, in the swagger and exaggeration characteristic of all three. California did not "produce" Bret Harte; the power of Dickens was greater than that of the Sierras and the Golden Gate. Bret Harte created a California that never existed, and Indian gentlemen, Caucasian and Hindoo, tell us that Kipling invented an army and an empire unknown to geographers and war-offices.

The ideas at work among these English men of letters



are world-encircling and fly between book and brain. The dominant power is on the British Islands, and the prevailing stream of influence flows west across the Atlantic. Sometimes it turns and runs the other way. Poe influenced Rossetti; Whitman influenced Henley. For a century Cooper has been in command of the British literary marine. Literature is reprehensibly unpatriotic, even though its votaries are, as individual citizens, afflicted with local prides and hostilities. It takes only a dramatic interest in the guns of Yorktown. Its philosophy was nobly uttered by Gaston Paris in the Collège de France in 1870, when the city was beleaguered by the German armies: "Common studies, pursued in the same spirit, in all civilized countries, form, beyond the restrictions of diverse and often hostile nationalities, a great country which no war profanes, no conqueror menaces, where souls find that refuge and unity which in former times was offered them by the city of God." The catholicity of English language and literature transcends the temporal boundaries of states.

What, then, of the "provincialism" of the American province of the empire of British literature? Is it an observable general characteristic, and is it a virtue or a vice? There is a sense in which American literature is not provincial enough. The most provincial of all literature is the Greek. The Greeks knew nothing outside of Greece and needed to know nothing. The Old Testament is tribal in its provinciality; its god is a local god, and its village police and sanitary regulations are erected into eternal laws. If this racial localism is not essential to the greatness of early literatures, it is inseparable

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from them; we find it there. It is not possible in our cosmopolitan age and there are few traces of it in American books. No American poet has sung of his neighbourhood with naïve passion, as if it were all the world to him. Whitman is pugnaciously American, but his sympathies are universal, his vision is cosmic; when he seems to be standing in a city street looking at life, he is in a trance, and his spirit is racing with the winds.

The welcome that we gave Whitman betrays the lack of an admirable kind of provincialism; it shows us defective in local security of judgment. Some of us have been so anxiously abashed by high standards of European culture that we could not see a poet in our own back yard until European poets and critics told us he was there. This is queerly contradictory to a disposition found in some Americans to disregard world standards and proclaim a third-rate poet as the Milton of Oshkosh or the Shelley of San Francisco. The passage in Lowell's "Fable for Critics" about "The American Bulwers, Disraelis and Scotts" is a spoonful of salt in the mouth of that sort of gaping village reverence.

Of dignified and self-respecting provincialism, such as Professor Royce so eloquently advocates, there might well be more in American books. Our poets desert the domestic landscape to write pseudo-Elizabethan dramas and sonnets about Mont Blanc. They set up an artificial Tennyson park on the banks of the Hudson. Beside the shores of Lake Michigan they croon the love affairs of an Arab in the desert and his noble steed. This is not a very grave offence, for poets live among the stars, and it makes no difference from what point

of the earth's surface they set forth on their aerial adventures. A Wisconsin poet may write very beautifully about nightingales, and a New England Unitarian may write beautifully about cathedrals; if it is beautiful, it is poetry, and all is well.

The novelists are the worst offenders. There have been few of them; they have not been adequate in numbers or in genius to the task of describing the sections of the country, the varied scenes and habits from New Orleans to the Portlands. And yet, small band as they are, with great domestic opportunities and responsibilities, they have devoted volumes to Paris, which has an able native corps of story-makers, and to Italy, where the home talent is first-rate. In this sense American literature is too globe-trotting, it has too little savour of the soil.

Of provincialism of the narrowest type American writers, like other men of imagination, are not guilty to any reprehensible degree. It is a vice sometimes imputed to them by provincial critics who view literature from the office of a London weekly review or from the lecture rooms of American colleges. Some American writers are parochial, for example, Whittier. Others, like Mr. Henry James, are provincial in outlook, but cosmopolitan in experience, and reveal their provinciality by a self-conscious internationalism. Probably English and French writers may be similarly classified as provincial or not. Mr. James says that Poe's collection of critical sketches "is probably the most complete and exquisite specimen of *provincialism* ever prepared for the edification of men."\* It is nothing like that. It is an example

\*See page 149

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of what happens when a hack reviewer's work in local journals is collected into a volume because he turns out to be a genius. The list of Poe's victims is not more remarkable for the number of nonentities it includes than "The Lives of the Poets" by the great Doctor Johnson, who was hack for a bookseller, and "introduced" all the poets that the taste of the time encouraged the bookseller to print. Poe was cosmopolitan in spirit; his prejudices were personal and highly original, usually against the prejudices of his *moment* and *milieu*. Hawthorne is less provincial, in the derogatory sense, than his charming biographer, Mr. James, as will become evident if one compares Hawthorne's American notes on England, written in long ago days of national rancour, with Mr. James's British notes on America ("The American Scene"), written in our happy days of spacious vision.

Emerson's ensphering universality overspreads Carlyle like the sky above a volcanic island. Indeed Carlyle (who knew more about American life and about what other people ought to do than any other British writer earlier than Mr. Chesterton) justly complains that Emerson is not sufficiently local and concrete; Carlyle longs to see "some Event, Man's Life, American Forest, or piece of creation which this Emerson loves and wonders at, well *Emersonized*." Longfellow would not stay at home and write more about the excellent village blacksmith; he made poetical tours of Europe and translated songs and legends from several languages for the delight of the villagers who remained behind. Lowell was so heartily cosmopolitan that American newspapers accused him of Anglomania — which proves their provincialism but acquits

him. Mr. Howells has written a better book about Venice than about Ohio. Mark Twain lived in every part of America, from Connecticut to California, he wrote about every country under the sun (and about some countries beyond the sun), he is read by all sorts and conditions of men in the English-speaking world, and he is an adopted hero in Vienna. It is difficult to come to any conclusion about provincialism as a characteristic of American literature.

American literature is on the whole idealistic, sweet, delicate, nicely finished. There is little of it which might not have appeared in the *Youth's Companion*. The notable exceptions are our most stalwart men of genius, Thoreau, Whitman, and Mark Twain. Any child can read American literature, and if it does not make a man of him, it at least will not lead him into forbidden realms. Indeed, American books too seldom come to grips with the problems of life, especially the books cast in artistic forms. The essayists, expounders, and preachers attack life vigorously and wrestle with the meaning of it. The poets are thin, moonshiny, meticulous in technique. Novelists are few and feeble, and dramatists are non-existent. These generalities, subject to exceptions, are confirmed by a reading of the first fifteen volumes of the *Atlantic Monthly*, which are a treasure-house of the richest period of American literary expression. In those volumes one finds a surprising number of vigorous, distinguished papers on politics, philosophy, science, even on literature and art. Many talented men and women, whose names are not well remembered, are clustered there about the half dozen salient men of genius; and the collection gives

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one a sense that the New England mind (aided by the outlying contributors) was, in its one Age of Thought, an abundant and diversified power. But the poetry is not memorable, except for some verses by the few standard poets. And the fiction is naïve. Edward Everett Hale's "The Man Without a Country" is almost the only story there that one comes on with a thrill either of recognition or of discovery.

It is hard to explain why the American, except in his exhortatory and passionately argumentative moods, has not struck deep into American life, why his stories and verses are, for the most part, only pretty things, nicely unimportant. Anthony Trollope had a theory that the absence of international copyright threw our market open too unrestrictedly to the British product, that the American novel was an unprotected infant industry; we printed Dickens and the rest without paying royalty and starved the domestic manufacturer. This theory does not explain. For there were many American novelists, published, read, and probably paid for their work. The trouble is that they lacked genius; they dealt with trivial, slight aspects of life; they did not take the novel seriously in the right sense of the word, though no doubt they were in another sense serious enough about their poor productions. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "Huckleberry Finn" are colossal exceptions to the prevailing weakness and superficiality of American novels.

Why do American writers turn their backs on life, miss its intensities, its significance? The American Civil War was the most tremendous upheaval in the world after the Napoleonic period. The imaginative reaction on it consists of



some fine essays, Lincoln's addresses, Whitman's war poetry, "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (which came before the war but is part of it), one or two passionate hymns by Whittier, the second series of the "Biglow Papers," Hale's "The Man Without a Country" — and what else? The novels laid in war-time are either sanguine melodrama or absurd idyls of maidens whose lovers are at the front — a tragic theme if tragically and not sentimentally conceived. Perhaps the bullet that killed Theodore Winthrop deprived us of our great novelist of the Civil War, for he was on the right road. In a general speculation such a might-have-been is not altogether futile; if Milton had died of whooping cough there would not have been any "Paradise Lost"; the reverse of this is that some geniuses whose works ought inevitably to have been produced by this or that national development may have died too soon. This suggestion, however, need not be gravely argued. The fact is that the American literary imagination after the Civil War was almost sterile. If no books had been written, the failure of that conflict to get itself embodied in some masterpieces would be less disconcerting. But thousands of books were written by people who knew the war at first hand and who had literary ambition and some skill, and from all these books none rises to distinction.

An example of what seems to be the American habit of writing about everything except American life, is the work of General Lew Wallace. Wallace was one of the important secondary generals in the Civil War, distinguished at Fort Donelson and at Shiloh. After the war he wrote "Ben-Hur," a doubly abominable book, because it is not badly written and it



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shows a lively imagination. There is nothing in it so valuable, so dramatically significant as a week in Wallace's war experiences. "Ben-Hur," fit work for a country clergyman with a pretty literary gift, is a ridiculous inanity to come from a man who has seen the things that Wallace saw! It is understandable that the man of experience may not write at all, and, on the other hand, that the man of secluded life may have the imagination to make a military epic. But for a man crammed with experience of the most dramatic sort and discovering the ability and the ambition to write — for him to make spurious oriental romances which achieve an enormous popularity! The case is too grotesque to be typical, yet it is exceptional in degree rather than in kind. The American literary artist has written about everything under the skies except what matters most in his own life. General Grant's plain autobiography, not art and of course not attempting to be, is better literature than most of our books in artistic forms, because of its intellectual integrity and the profound importance of the subject-matter.

Our dreamers have dreamed about many wonderful things, but their faces have been averted from the mightier issues of life. They have been high-minded, fine-grained, eloquent in manner, in odd contrast to the real or reputed vigour and crudeness of the nation. In the hundred years from Irving's first romance to Mr. Howells's latest unromantic novel, most of our books are eminent for just those virtues which America is supposed to lack. Their physique is feminine; they are fanciful, dainty, reserved; they are literose, sophisticated in craftsmanship, but innocently unaware of the profound agi-

tations of American life, of life everywhere. Those who strike the deeper notes of reality, Whitman, Thoreau, Mark Twain, Mrs. Stowe in her one great book, Whittier, Lowell and Emerson at their best, are a powerful minority. The rest, beautiful and fine in spirit, too seldom show that they are conscious of contemporaneous realities, too seldom vibrate with a tremendous sense of life.

The Jason of western exploration writes as if he had passed his life in a library. The Ulysses of great rivers and perilous seas is a connoisseur of Japanese prints. The warrior of 'Sixty-one rivals Miss Marie Corelli. The mining engineer carves cherry stones. He who is figured as gaunt, hardy and aggressive, conquering the desert with the steam locomotive, sings of a pretty little rose in a pretty little garden. The judge, haggard with experience, who presides over the most tragi-comic divorce court ever devised by man, writes love stories that would have made Jane Austen smile.

Mr. Arnold Bennett is reported to have said that if Balzac had seen Pittsburgh, he would have cried: "Give me a pen!" The truth is, the whole country is crying out for those who will record it, satirize it, chant it. As literary material, it is virgin land, ancient as life and fresh as a wilderness. American literature is one occupation which is not overcrowded, in which, indeed, there is all too little competition for the newcomer to meet. There are signs that some earnest young writers are discovering the fertility of a soil that has scarcely been scratched.

American fiction shows all sorts of merit, but the merits are not assembled, concentrated; the fine is weak, and the strong

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is crude. The stories of Poe, Hawthorne, Howells, James, Aldrich, Bret Harte, are admirable in manner, but they are thin in substance, not of large vitality. On the other hand, some of the stronger American fictions fail in workmanship; for example, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which is still vivid and moving long after its tractarian interest has faded; the novels of Frank Norris, a man of great vision and high purpose, who attempted to put national economics into something like an epic of daily bread; and Herman Melville's "Moby Dick," a madly eloquent romance of the sea. A few American novelists have felt the meaning of the life they knew and have tried sincerely to set it down, but have for various reasons failed to make first-rate novels; for example, Edward Eggleston, whose stories of early Indiana have the breath of actuality in them; Mr. E. W. Howe, author of "The Story of a Country Town"; Harold Frederic, a man of great ability, whose work was growing deeper, more significant when he died; George W. Cable, whose novels are unsteady and sentimental, but who gives a genuine impression of having portrayed a city and its people; and Stephen Crane, who, dead at thirty, had given in "The Red Badge of Courage" and "Maggie" the promise of better work. Of good short stories America has been prolific. Mrs. Wilkins-Freeman, Mrs. Annie Trumbull Slosson, Sarah Orne Jewett, Rowland Robinson, H. C. Bunner, Edward Everett Hale, Frank Stockton, Joel Chandler Harris, and "O. Henry" are some of those whose short stories are perfect in their several kinds. But the American novel, which multiplies past counting, remains an inferior production.

On a private shelf of contemporary fiction and drama in the English language are the works of ten British authors, Mr. Galsworthy, Mr. H. G. Wells, Mr. Arnold Bennett, Mr. Eden Phillpotts, Mr. George Moore, Mr. Leonard Merrick, Mr. J. C. Snaith, Miss May Sinclair, Mr. William De Morgan, Mr. Maurice Hewlett, Mr. Joseph Conrad, Mr. Bernard Shaw, yes, and Mr. Rudyard Kipling. Beside them I find but two Americans, Mrs. Edith Wharton and Mr. Theodore Dreiser. There may be others, for one cannot pretend to know all the living novelists and dramatists. Yet for every American that should be added, I would agree to add four to the British list. However, a contemporary literature that includes Mrs. Wharton's "Ethan Frome" and Mr. Dreiser's "Jennie Gerhardt" both published last year, is not to be despaired of.

In the course of a century a few Americans have said in memorable words what life meant to them. Their performance, put together, is considerable, if not imposing. Any sense of dissatisfaction that one feels in contemplating it is due to the disproportion between a limited expression and the multifarious immensity of the country. Our literature, judged by the great literatures contemporaneous with it, is insufficient to the opportunity and the need. The American Spirit may be figured as petitioning the Muses for twelve novelists, ten poets, and eight dramatists, to be delivered at the earliest possible moment.

## CHAPTER II

### IRVING

"A FREE PEOPLE," says Irving, "are apt to be grave and thoughtful. They have high and important matters to occupy their minds. They feel that it is their right, their interest, and their duty, to mingle in public concerns, and to watch over the general welfare. The continual exercise of the mind on political topics gives intenser habits of thinking, and a more serious and earnest demeanour. A nation becomes less gay, but more intellectually active and vigorous. It evinces less play of the fancy, but more power of the imagination; less taste and elegance, but more grandeur of mind; less animated vivacity, but deeper enthusiasm.

"It is when men are shut out of the regions of manly thought, by a despotic government; when every grave and lofty theme is rendered perilous to discussion and almost to reflection; it is then that they turn to the safer occupations of taste and amusement; trifles rise to importance, and occupy the craving activity of intellect. No being is more void of care and reflection than the slave; none dances more gayly, in his intervals of labour; but make him free, give him rights and interests to guard, and he becomes thoughtful and laborious."

Had the creator of Diedrich Knickerbocker, Ichabod Crane,

and Rip Van Winkle habitually dwelt in the sober mood of the foregoing passage, he would have been an obscure case in support of his own queer theory. Whether or not merriment and sweet fancy were oppressed by the spirit of liberty which dominated America a century ago, the genius of Irving refused to succumb. The piper of the mystic song of Liberty may have led the children under the mountain of Civil Rights; Irving is the boy who came back. "A grown-up child," he calls himself, speaking in the person of Geoffrey Crayon. Through a long and peaceful life he remains impenitently gay. While Governor Clinton, "amid the acclamations of the multitude," symbolizes the completion of the Erie Canal by pouring two kegs of Lake Erie water into the Atlantic, Irving peoples the banks of the Hudson with elves and goblins. The railroad soon renders the Erie Canal as obsolete as any piece of Egyptian engineering; but Irving's creations are not displaced by successors; his fresh voice of laughter and romance still rings solitary along the Hudson palisades.

Irving was a child of fortune. His father was in comfortable circumstances, and the young man was able to indulge in three pleasures which cherished his talents: innocent idling among the people of New York, especially in the older parts of the town and along the water front; writing and publishing for the sport of it; and travelling in Europe. The delicate state of his health made it necessary, or advisable, that he should make sea voyages. Since his invalidity did not assume painful forms nor fetter his work either as man of letters or man of affairs, it may be regarded as fortunate, for



it won him dispensations which his father would not perhaps have accorded to a robust young man. Irving's genius was not so powerful that it would have hewn works of art out of strife and poverty. His gentle fancy was nourished by well-being, by leisure to indulge his amiable indolence, to sit on the bank and watch life stream by, to catch a glimpse of a comic old face in the crowd or the fluttering ribbon on a girl's bonnet. Yet he was not an irresponsible idler who filled his knapsack from other peoples' larders and paid his debt to the heirs of the almoners in priceless books. He was a good business man and self-reliant. At the age of twenty-six he proved his literary gifts and won flattering applause by his "Knickerbocker's History of New York"; but he rejected the alluring career of letters, went into partnership with his brother and for ten years devoted himself to trade. It was only when the business failed that he published his second volume, "The Sketch Book," which was so popular as to warrant, not only from an artistic but from a practical point of view, his committing himself to the literary career.

He had justified his leisure and he continued to earn a right to it. When he loafed he invited his soul and not the censure of his family. His was a happy and normal life. He wandered through the woods communing with pixies and the ghosts of mythical Dutchmen; his fancy kept company with tatterdemalions and tap-room idlers; but he was a handsome, fashionable young bachelor, and he lived amid the conventional "best society." If the death of his sweetheart threw a cloud of melancholy over his life, the



shadow of the cloud is not upon his work. There is no trace in his writings of the tragedy of actual life.

His portrait is a most satisfying presentment of the kind of man who ought to have written his books. It shows a broad brow with the hair curled youthfully about the temples; a straight, sensible nose; a wide, humorous mouth twitching at the corners even in the repose of an engraving; eyes clear, observant, not piercing; the whole face placid and prosperous; the head held with dignity above a full chest.

The picture of our first man of letters is also a portrait of a gentleman-scholarly diplomat. Irving was minister to Spain and discharged his public duties in a creditable manner. He received whatever honour academic and political officialdom can bestow upon a literary man, and the pride and affection of his countrymen followed him for forty years. He was welcomed in Europe, in Thackeray's happy phrase, as the "first ambassador whom the New World of Letters sent to the Old."

Perhaps the old world of letters was not in aching need of a messenger from our world of letters, but our world was starving for a voice of romance. Irving taught America that the star of romance shines above the forests of Astoria as truly as above Alhambra; indeed the spell that Irving casts over Astoria makes us forget that he was playing press-agent for a land-grabber and a swindler of Indians. Irving also taught us that the literary spirit is whimsical and expresses life by devious indirections, that it says what one would not expect it to say and blandly ignores momentous matters. Irving inaugurated American literature not with

the trumpets of rebellion, not with an epic elevation befitting a people who had conquered a wilderness, but with quiet, old-fashioned humour, a cultivated reserved accent, urbane manners, and a smiling indifference to certain local passions. Even at home he is a sympathetic and observant tourist, intimately acquainted with what he sees but not immersed in its currents of thought. He does not make us feel what most stirred the hearts and perplexed the minds of any considerable class of Americans in the year 1825. From the social contests, the clashing forces of mind and of economic necessities, the industrial and spiritual developments by reason of which we are now alive and what we are, Irving is almost as aloof as Poe.

It may be that the apparent contrast between Irving's interests and what we now imagine to have been the most intense interests of his contemporaries is due to his temperament and to that side of it which enabled him to seek the society of the immortals. Perhaps a man more soaked with reality could not have come forth from the life about him and risen above the threshold of expression. There was in his time but a small recognized leisure class, a thin cultivated stratum of people upheld by church, university, family tradition and well-founded prosperity. The best brains of the people were busy with the problem of getting a livelihood. A man had to be doing something obviously worth while or lose self-respect and the respect of his neighbours. A long-established culture that lives at the expense of the multitude (such is the dependence of culture in all capitalist societies) may be unjustified from the point of view of social equity;

but at least such a culture has leisure and training to express itself in art. In a young country, for the settlement of which the only motive is to find a living for one's self by labour or exploitation (and that is the motive for the colonizing of America despite the stories of the quest for religious liberty and other superstitions of history), every able man works; the drone is either the unfit, incapable of producing literature or anything else, or the exploiter on the alert for commercial advantage. The worthy individual who wins exemption from the workaday struggle wins it after a youth of toil or business responsibility, and he is then not habituated to æsthetic interests and the pursuits of art.

Before Irving most American books that remain important, were written by men of affairs, politicians and clergymen such as Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Franklin, and the orators and pamphleteers of the Revolution. After Irving had become famous there grew up in America academic societies which favoured the muse of the New England group and constituted a circle encouraging readers. There also arose the commercial institution of professional journalism which gave a career to a few whose pens, competent to earn some sort of living, were also competent to do work for the ages. The first flower of this institution was Poe.

In America there was no such thing as pensioned authors, idle clergymen living on church incomes and devoting their time to literature, holders of easy places under the government and enabled to spend their afternoons in writing. In Irving's youth the temptation to write for a livelihood was slight; the economic conditions put no premium on labours of

the fancy. To be a literary man in the society that surrounded Irving was to be a dreamer and wanderer. A man with a vital sense of reality would have been in the thick of the practical struggle. In a society which has no literary tradition, which is not accustomed to having a poet or two in the neighbourhood, the first man to lift himself to the privileged class of authors is the man of light and untroubled fancy. Irving's circumstances relieved him from the harshest necessity of earning his daily bread. Life did not bear hard on him and he did not look hard at life. Fortune and his lightness of spirit agreed to let him play with literature until he and the world found it a good business for him.

Irving initiated our imaginative literature in a holiday mood. He and his brother William, with J. K. Paulding, a writer of some experience, founded in 1807 a biweekly periodical called *Salmagundi*. It was a pastime entered into with the enthusiasm which many a young man has thrown into a journalistic venture and has maintained until unpaid printers' bills have stifled jubilant enterprise. Had Irving and his brother been poor, as they were manly and honest, they must have gone immediately and with their whole energy into gainful occupations. Irving would have had no apprenticeship in which to try his pen; in the words of the valedictory of *Salmagundi*, he would have let "immortality slip through his fingers." As things were, he could practise writing while to senior eyes he was respectably studying law; and he could get his first work published without waiting upon the rigours of the market. Before business responsibilities fell on him he had "commenced author" in

a small way and discovered his talents. In the slight papers of *Salmagundi*, modelled upon the English periodical essayists, he had sharpened his style for "Knickerbocker's History of New York."

The "History of New York" is a merry piece of fooling. It is a parody of the pretentious historical style and a satire on the spurious heroic in colonial legend. It is full of burlesque yarns, extravagant adventures, and jolly caricatures of the Dutch burghers. The literary skill of the book lies in its sustained narrative swing, the grave rhythm of the periods which carry nonsensical matter. The mere joker cannot achieve this; it is true comic art.

Soon after Irving had tried his wings in the "History of New York," he was obliged to fold them and content himself with the solid earth. He engaged in business, and five years later went on a commercial errand to England. He remained in Europe seventeen years. In 1820 he published "The Sketch Book," a collection of miscellaneous pieces that had appeared in American periodicals. Among them were "Rip Van Winkle," and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Rip took his place at once among the favourite heroes of fantastic story, and later he became doubly endeared to the American people by his incarnation in the genial person of Joseph Jefferson. Irving's tale is so simple, so familiar, that in rereading it one may easily take it for granted and not be struck by its genius. To be convinced that it is a masterpiece one needs but to reflect how infrequently such a tender weanling is adopted as the child of time. A little thing that happens seldom is important.

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The story of Rip is based on a German legend, and the origin accounts in some measure for the elementary directness of the tale, a virtue that sophisticated art cannot easily counterfeit, but can easily destroy. Irving has preserved the quality of a folk-tale, and at the same time he permits himself the privilege of winking at the reader over the head of Knickerbocker.

"Rip Van Winkle" is not an accidental, solitary success. All the stories in "The Sketch Book," notably "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," and other yarns comic and creepy in "Bracebridge Hall," and "Tales of A Traveller," are well told, with sprightly verve and grace. There are no afterthoughts or under-purposes. The attitude is that of a familiar raconteur who has no object in the world but to entertain his company, to puff his pipe in fireside ease and give the tale as 'twas given him. This style of narrative never hints that it is difficult to do and deceives one into overlooking its remarkable rare excellence.

Irving's avowed debt to Goldsmith and his fondness for tales of British squiredom warrant to some extent the view that he is an imitator of the English essayists and character-sketchers of the eighteenth century. He has been called a "belated" American Goldsmith. There has arisen in one quarter the curious notion (a theory running wild with a little fact in its mouth) that American literature is habitually a generation behind English literature. Even Holmes, a very modern man, is accounted for in terms of the "eighteenth-century spirit." The truth seems to be that nineteenth-century thought everywhere



is eclectic, and of its many voices each is germane to the times.

Any man, anywhere, writing at the opening of the last century is inevitably dependent on the eighteenth century. In England a small group of men, Lamb, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, were in revolt against the eighteenth century; they withdrew from the dominion of Doctor Johnson and made splendid new alliances with Milton and Thomas Browne. As time goes by, this group of revolvers grows greater and greater in our admiration, until to our eyes they stand for their times and we see them like a range of hills beyond which lies the eighteenth-century plateau. But this is an illusion of perspective. A survey of the country shows that Keats and Lamb and Coleridge did not dominate their own age. Their contemporaries, Southey, Scott, even Byron, were not so clearly emancipated from the preceding age. In literature the transition from period to period is gradual like the passing from adolescence to manhood; the eighteenth century never ended, and the nineteenth century did not at any definite moment begin. Literature is a continuous processus; one writer looks a little ahead, another harks back to an immediately or distantly earlier time. Irving is no more filled with the eighteenth-century spirit than are many of his British contemporaries. Byron and Scott are his heroes no less than Goldsmith, and he makes pilgrimages to Newstead Abbey and Abbotsford. His attitude toward Johnson is that of the nineteenth-century romantic making a case for the gentle poetic Goldsmith against the kindly tyranny of the critical prosaic bear.

Irving is not, of course, akin to the spirit of revolt that now seems the most significant fact of the age of Wordsworth; he is a conventional man, with no very profound convictions, no intense theory of life. His philosophy is that of the amiable, gifted man of the world of all times and places; "I have always had an opinion that much good might be done by keeping mankind in good humour with one another." Such a philosophy does not proceed from a nature that is torn by everlasting problems, but it is not referable to any special period of literary thought; it is as near to Scott as to Addison, it is as remote from Swift as from Shelley.

Irving's nature combines good portions of sentiment and manly common sense. In no one book of his are these elements more harmoniously blended than in his "Life of Goldsmith." Here he is not in whimsical masquerade as Knickerbocker or Crayon, and he is not labouring over a complex subject as in his biographies of Columbus and Washington. The man Irving, talks with an old-fashioned, dignified informality about the man Goldsmith. The book is one of the masterpieces of literary biography, attracting the reader to author and to subject, like Walton's lives of Donne and Herbert. He understands Goldsmith and his friends and is at home in their society. He is quite free from the later fallacy of biographical essayists, that criticism is a science. He has the acumen of humorous good sense and the gift of appreciating the charm of others in the act of being charming himself. He pays his respects to Boswell with good-natured sharpness. "Boswell," he says, "was a unitarian in his literary devotion and disposed to worship none but Johnson."

“Never since the days of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza has there been presented to the world a more whimsically contrasted pair of associates than Johnson and Boswell.”

At about the time that Irving was penning these words, a heavier humour was being brandished over Boswell's head by Thomas Carlyle; the careers of Goldsmith and Johnson were being subjected to philosophic inquiry (or unphilosophic assertion) more profound and more puzzle-headed than a simple man like Irving was capable of. Irving's unlaboured appreciation seems more appropriate to his subject than the more complex disputes of Victorian criticism; his talents conform naturally to a subject that he chose in obedience to temperamental kinship. The “few desultory remarks” at the close of his book are none the less wise for their smiling graciousness. Goldsmith, he says, carries throughout his career “the wayward elfin spirit.” The same spirit accompanied his American biographer.

The limitations of the talent that makes the “Life of Goldsmith” so entirely satisfying are revealed in the voluminous biography of Washington. That is a patient, laborious book upon which Irving spent years of study. When he undertook it he had become a responsible ambassador with a sense of the formal obligations of patriotism and scholarship. The work forced his genius out of its natural course. I do not know how historians regard his “Life of Washington,” whether it is to them more or less sound than the investigations of other historians in those days when chroniclers were men of letters unharassed by “scientific” conscience. To a casual reader the book sounds tired, and that is a defect per-

mitted to accurate historians, but not to myth-makers and essayists who in other works have won us with unveracious stories.

The study of Washington was carried on in the closing years of Irving's life and was interrupted by illness, which may explain its lack of vivacity. Except for this lack, the tone of the book is admirable. Irving's candour and reserve deliver him from the temptations of hero-worship. "We have avoided," he says, "rhetorical amplifications and embellishments, and all gratuitous assumptions, and have sought by simple and truthful details to give his character an opportunity of developing itself." During Irving's life there grew up and solidified an inflexible image which pious oratory and uncritical patriotism hallowed as the father of our country. That dehumanized myth ought to have been replaced by Irving's manly portrait. Perhaps the length of his work diminished its effect, for although the four substantial volumes were well received, and an audience was ensured by the popularity of author and subject, the public naturally contents itself with short accounts of our first President, and does not make household companions of Irving's long book nor of Spark's compendious documents. The restoration of Washington to human proportions was a task left to our contemporary, Mr. Owen Wister.

Irving's genius is not that of a great historian but rather that of a picturesque chronicler who selects the adventurous and the vivid. He is therefore more successful with Spanish history and biography, than with the annals of America. His "Life of Columbus" is an absorbing book. We may

credit his statement that it is "faithfully digested" from a great variety of authentic sources, and we may justly remain indifferent to the degree of error which it may betray in the light of subsequent studies. From the most reprehensible errors it is splendidly free, from the errors of stupidity, from the errors that attend a lack of imagination.

Is it too much to say that Irving's style, resonant and full of colour, set a standard for American historians, to which is owing in some measure the rich readability of Prescott and Parkman? And is it presumptuous to suggest that there has departed a glory from historical writing which in these alert and many-talented days might advantageously be recovered by those historiographers who "discourse of affairs orderly as they were done?" Of the arid and cautiously accurate there is no lack, and there is plenty, too, of the over-rhetorical which results from the efforts of mediocrity to sound the pipes of eloquence. Professional historians who would be neither dry nor sentimental might profitably go to school to Irving and learn that verity is not incompatible with the stately charm of his style. The mind is stimulated, certainly it is not distracted from the true order of events, by such a sentence as this from the "Life of Columbus": "What consoled the Spaniards for the asperity of the soil was to observe among the sands of those crystal streams glittering particles of gold, which, though scanty in quantity, were regarded as an earnest of the wealth locked up within the mountains." It may be that the pleasant appeal of that sentence to an American ear is due to the subject, wealth, in which only America among the nations of the earth has

evinced any considerable interest — a bit of irony not out of place in a chapter on Irving, for it was he who invented the phrase “almighty dollar.”

The flower of Irving's residence in Spain and his study of Spanish chronicle is “The Alhambra.” This book is sketchy and informal, and in it the exigencies of history do not compel Irving's genius beyond its delicate powers. His style is fit for this enchanted palace; the fragmentary traditions furnish him with the sort of fanciful short story which he knew how to touch with pretty skill. In these inconsequential tales, spun with fine zest and pretending to no virtuous purpose but the giving of pleasure, Irving meets the genius of the Arabian nights and is not dwarfed by it.

Certain American books have sufficient depth and breadth to be called masterpieces; they stand self-contained and all but assured of immortality; such books are “The Scarlet Letter,” “The House of the Seven Gables,” “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” “The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table,” “Huckleberry Finn.” Other books, like Emerson's “Essays” and Whitman's poems, contain matter of loftiest quality yet in such brief form that the author's title to mastery lies in the collected work, rather than in any single unit of art. In neither of these ultimate classes can Irving be included. Though one would not wish to quarrel with whoever should call “Rip Van Winkle” a self-secure masterpiece, nevertheless Irving is, for all his bulky histories, essentially a sketcher, a miscellanist. His place is on one of the gentler lower slopes of literature in the company suggested



by the sub-title of "Bracebridge Hall" — "The Humourists, a Medley."

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Irving was born in New York City, April 3, 1783. He died at Sunnyside, near Tarrytown, New York, November 28, 1859. He travelled in Europe from 1804 to 1806. He studied law and was admitted to the bar, but did not practise. He went to England on business in 1815. The business failed the next year, but he remained in England until 1820. The next nine years he spent on the continent of Europe. In 1826 he was attaché of the United States legation in Spain, and in 1829 he was appointed secretary of legation at London. From 1832 to 1842 he lived at Sunnyside on the Hudson. He was Minister to Spain from 1842 to 1846. The rest of his life was spent in New York and at Sunnyside.

His works are *Salmagundi*, 1807–1808; *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, 1809; *Sketch-Book*, 1819–1820; *Bracebridge Hall*, 1822; *Tales of a Traveller*, 1824; *Life and Voyages of Columbus*, 1828; *The Conquest of Granada*, 1829; *The Companions of Columbus*, 1831; *The Alhambra*, 1832; *Crayon Miscellanies*, 1835; *Astoria*, 1836; *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, 1837; *Oliver Goldsmith*, 1849; *Mahomet and His Successors*, 1849; *Wolfert's Roost*, 1855; *Life of Washington*, 1855–1859; *Spanish Papers*, 1866.

It is worth noting, as a matter of literary history and as an example of Irving's magnanimity, that he had planned

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to write the chronicle of the conquest of Mexico, but when he heard that Prescott had the same plan, he yielded the subject to his junior. Irving was not married. His nephew Pierre Irving, edited his "Life and Letters." The best biography of Irving is that by Charles Dudley Warner in *American Men of Letters*.

## CHAPTER III

### COOPER

IN 1820, when Cooper was thirty years old, he read a feeble conventional English novel; irritated by its futility, he announced to his wife that he could write a better one, and the result was his first book, "Precaution." It is a poor book, because it is not grounded on the author's experience, and because Cooper had not the kind of imagination that can give reality to human characters in ordinary social surroundings. But he learned his lesson and turned immediately to outdoor scenes with which he was familiar, and to adventures which he had witnessed or which were appropriate to the ground he knew. "The Spy," a tale of the Revolution, was successful, and he followed it industriously with "The Pioneers," "The Pilot," "The Last of the Mohicans."

Those who insist that a young country ought to produce a "young" literature, will find Cooper a rather valid subsumption under a theory that is not quite valid but is largely a matter of verbal analogy. What does "young" mean? Our literature is a pleasant-voiced, fine-mannered gentleman, well past middle age. There is all too little of the untamed boy about it. But Cooper is in many senses "young." Though he was a dignified and self-consciously important personage,

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without a touch of the boyishness that bubbles out of Irving, Mark Twain, and Stevenson, yet his art never grows up: it is always immature, awkward, a thousand years younger than the craftsmanship that Kipling had learned at twenty-one. That the young of all ages all over the world welcomed Cooper is an obvious fact. Such undeniable "youth" is a warrant of immortality which adult criticism cannot gainsay and would not if it could.

How many of us at the age of fifteen have gone to the public library, taken out a story by Cooper, returned it two days later and taken another, then another, allowing no rival author to intrude in the breathless succession! That in the years when we inhabited Cooper's world for two months at a stretch we were capable of giving other months of equally unbroken attention to the interminable Henty and Oliver Optic, somewhat tarnishes the lustre of our admiration; it enables our elders to discredit Cooper by pointing to the company of uninspired story-tellers with whom in our innocence we indiscriminately grouped him, and the wise ones can also indulge in dark and slurring hints at another kind of literature which we read, likewise in our innocence, yet with a thrilling sense of guilt.

We are rather stumped for an answer to the argument that boys who like Henty and certain unnamable authors just as heartily as they like Cooper and Scott and "Tom Brown" are not trustworthy judges. On our side, however, is an international league of youth; boys of alien speech are reading *Le Tueur des Daims* and *Der Letzte der Mohikaner*. Cooper's books were published, as they came out, in thirty

different European cities; he was almost as famous on the continent as Scott and Byron. The consensus of the races and the generations has stamped him with approval which some of our other favourites have not received. Our cultivated sires must, then, lay aside Meredith and Anatole France long enough to tell us why Uncas is as familiar to the school boys of Berlin as to those of New York, and why in nearly a hundred years Cooper's popularity has not abated.

Pretty work the elders make of explaining it! They talk about style, character-drawing, the "epic" of pioneer life, and they attribute to this most popular yarn-spinner literary virtues no more appropriate to him than to the graven images of Chingachgook that used to stand before the tobacco shops. Style? His style is one of the obstacles that his story plows through, like Bumpo shouldering through underbrush. Listen to this!

"Chafed by the silent imputation, and inwardly troubled by so unaccountable a circumstance, the chief advanced to the side of the bed, and stooping, cast an incredulous look at the features, as if distrusting their reality. His daughter was dead. The unerring feeling of nature for a moment prevailed and the old warrior hid his eyes in sorrow." How can a boy like such writing as that, pompous, inhuman, erring against every feeling of nature? The boy does not like it, he disregards it. He understands that the daughter is dead, a fact plainly stated amid the majestic polysyllables, and that the chief is sorry. The boy goes on with the story and leaves it to the critics to worry about the style.

Cora and Alice are racing with death! It is an exciting

race which any full-blooded person will follow, must follow, fascinated to the end. The sophisticated reader condescends to watch it, is ensnared in the interest of it all, and then suddenly, Cooper calls his heroines "distressed females." That is almost fatal; illusion wavers; but the sensitive spectator grits his teeth, recovers and continues to watch. Cooper gets him and holds him in spite of everything. Meanwhile "distressed females" has not distracted the attention of the boy. Cooper may call the ladies anything he likes so long as he does not leave a doubt as to who they are and what is happening to them; and he never leaves any such doubt.

Some books have cast over the young of all generations a spell which no mature experience dissolves, for example, "Robinson Crusoe," "Two Years Before the Mast," and "Treasure Island." The grown man who has read widely knows that "Treasure Island" is in admirable style. He joins with his son in praising it, but they do not praise just the same things. If the book were rewritten so that all the rhythm were knocked out of the sentences, it would be destroyed for many adults, whereas the essential narrative would hold the boy almost as well as the book does in its verbal perfection. For the boy and for most readers Cooper is as good with his faults as he would be without them. To foreign readers some of his faults are not evident; translation removes them, or unfamiliarity with English softens them. Balzac, who admired Cooper, would have shivered at French as bad as Cooper's English. "That," said Balzac to a friend, "is Fenimore Cooper's latest work. It is fine, it is grand, it



is intensely interesting. I know no one but Walter Scott who has ever risen to that grandeur and serenity of colouring."

It is the stuff of Cooper that counts. His lakes and woods and seas, unpoetically as he conveys them, are in themselves poetic, a wonder of wilderness and water alive with rapid, various adventure, heart-stopping ambuscades, the steering of a ship past treacherous rocks. It matters not to the unsophisticated mind that Natty Bumppo talks sometimes like Cooper and sometimes like the unliterary woodsman that he is. The enjoyment of the critical Olympian is disturbed by violations of character, especially of the diction of character, by preposterous phrasing, by ungainliness which is due not to untutored simplicity, but to an unmastered bookish vocabulary. When the professional critic, knowing that Cooper is good, sets out to praise him, he often makes the mistake of denying Cooper's faults, like a romantic who should say of a squinting woman: "I love her and admire her; therefore she has lovely eyes."

Cooper's immortality need not be explained by standards to which he does not come up. It is no credit to Cooper, or to the critic, to attribute to the Deerslayer stories perfections without which they have survived splendidly and can continue to survive. Professor Lounsbury says that "The Pathfinder" and "The Deerslayer" are pure works of art with only slight defects. Then ensues a spirited and delightful contest between Professor Lounsbury and Mark Twain, who proves that Cooper breaks eighteen out of nineteen rules of fiction. The whole contest, a very exhilarating piece of critical by-play, is on a false plane, and of course

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Professor Lounsbury and other critics are responsible for putting it there. After the contestants have mauled Cooper on both sides, Natty Bumppo shoulders his long rifle and strides off as if nothing had happened. Nothing has happened that really concerns him.

Professor Lounsbury thinks that Cooper's style suffered because he left college in his third year, and that the lack of certain qualities in his writing can be traced pretty directly to this lack of "preliminary intellectual drill" — as if good old Yale or any other American college ever helped a man of genius to write! The preliminary intellectual drill which men of letters need, which some men get while they happen to be in college and some men get when they happen not to be in college, is not the sort which our beloved universities have shown themselves competent to administer.

We do not know why Cooper did not learn to write better. There is that in his style which suggests that he was congenitally tone-deaf, and that even a course in a theological seminary could not have cured his constitutional defects. We do know that after he was dismissed from Yale he went into the merchant marine and the navy and found matter for stories, good, honest, yo-heave-ho and belay-there stories. And we know too, we who have passed irrevocably into the sad daylight of culture, which, as Emerson says, instantly impairs the chiefest beauty of spontaneousness — we know that Cooper is not a great artist; he is wholly satisfactory only to those who have no ear for style, who are indifferent to consistency of character, who do not care how the "dry twig" got there, so that somebody steps on it at a ticklish moment.

It is not as though Cooper were a teller of naïve, unvarnished tales; such tales please the most fastidious mind. His fault is that he has coated his stories with a sticky, tacky varnish of ugly hue. To deny this is not only to misunderstand his merit, the great power that overcomes his own dead weight of words, but to misconceive the pleasure that millions of readers find in him. It is unjust to ascribe to a classic virtues to which it has no claim. Cooper is an outdoor man. Critics have shut him up in their studies with books about rhetoric and style and other things of limited interest. Mark Twain opened the study windows and let in some fresh air. But he did not stop with this revivifying service; he jumped in through the window and stamped on the critics. And all the while Cooper was out in the woods.

Cooper gave to fiction some wholly new material, primeval as the forest, native and sincere. He knew the woods and he knew the sea. He knew Indians objectively, their appearance and habits of action. Their habits of mind, about which we know nothing, he probably did not understand, because he did not understand the characters of white men and women. The ladies in "The Pilot" are intolerable, much worse than Dickens's Dora and Agnes. But when the mysterious stranger begins to handle the ship, how she sails!

Cooper did not like people any too heartily. Perhaps it is not unduly fanciful to see a connection between his failure to understand his characters and the stupidity that allowed him, a prosperous and honoured man, to make himself and his neighbours miserable through years of quarrel.

Human nature was not his province; when he tried to sail

in it he was as a landlubber; when he tried to strike through it on foot, he was as a greenhorn in the woods to whom Natty Bumppo might deliver patronizing lectures. Cooper loves open air nature heartily, honestly, and he manages to impart his enthusiasm through his heavy ineptitudes of expression. His Indians are part of nature, like the wild animals; we accept them, we do not know enough about them to question their "psychology."

It is a tribute to Cooper that no American since his time, for all our real or pretended gains in ethnological knowledge, has made any better Indians. Of late years western stories have recorded the contact of our civilization with the remnants of the better tribes of red men whom we have debauched and cheated, and with the dirty, unheroic savages of the plains. But few of the later writers seem to have been really fond of the Indians, to have drawn them as convincing heroes or interesting villains.

Men who go north and meet the woods Indian still unspoiled (I am thinking especially of one sympathetic and shrewd explorer) tell us that they find the living brother of Cooper's bronze hero, dignified, of high honour, stoical and eloquent. Cooper's red heroes are at least as convincing as many of the paleface heroes of romance whom we accept. Uncas and Chingachgook will bear scrutiny as well as Rob Roy and Robin Hood. It is with them, the figures of myth, that Natty Bumppo belongs; he is not an American character but a fabulous personage, like Ulysses, Achilles, King Arthur, and the adorable pirates of Howard Pyle and Stevenson. He has taken his place in this gallery of demigods and held it

for a century. There he seems likely to remain until we close the institution forever and the innocent credulity which is the postulate of romance shall become an atrophied function in man.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

James Fenimore Cooper was born in Burlington, New Jersey, September 15, 1789; he died at Cooperstown, New York, September 14, 1851. Cooperstown was settled by his father, who owned a large tract of land there. In Cooper's boyhood it was wilderness, and "The Pioneers" is a picture of the country. He went to Yale College, but was dismissed for a misdemeanour in his third year. Then he entered the merchant service for a year, after which he enlisted in the navy and served as midshipman four years. He married, resigned from the navy, and became a gentleman farmer, first on Long Island, then at Cooperstown. He went to England in 1826, returned to America in 1833. He wrote three books to attack monarchy and uphold republicanism, two books to attack the vices of his countrymen, and three books to uphold the landlords in their fight with settlers; he was one of the landlords. His controversies made the most widely read author the most unpopular man in America. He was an honest fighter and showed in his life some of the qualities and defects of his books.

His works are: *Precaution*, 1820; *The Spy*, 1821; *The Pioneers*, 1823; *The Pilot*, 1823; *Lionel Lincoln*, 1823-1824; *The Last of the Mohicans*, 1826; *the Prairie*, 1827; *The Red Rover*, 1828; *Notions of the Americans*, 1828; *The Wept of*

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the Wish-ton-wish, 1829; The Water Witch, 1830; The Bravo, 1831; The Heidenmauer, 1832; The Headsman, 1833; The Monikins, 1835; Sketches of Switzerland, 1835; Gleanings in Europe (France, 1837; England, 1837; Italy, 1838); The American Democrat, 1838; The Chronicles of Coopers-town, 1838; Homeward Bound, 1838; Home as Found, 1838; History of the Navy of the United States, 1839; The Pathfinder, 1840; Mercedes of Castile, 1840; The Deerslayer, 1841; The Two Admirals, 1842; Wing-and-Wing, 1842; Wyandotte, 1843; Ned Myers, 1843; Afloat and Ashore, 1844; Satanstoe, 1845; The Chainbearer, 1845; Lives of Distinguished Naval Officers, 1846; The Redskins, 1846; The Crater, 1847; Jack Tier, 1848; The Oak Openings, 1848; The Sea Lions, 1849; The Ways of the Hour, 1850.

I know of no good essay on Cooper, except that on his "Literary Offenses" by Mark Twain, which is amusing and is a suggestive discourse on the art of fiction; but it should be taken with a grain of sugar. Professor Lounsbury's "Life" in *American Men of Letters* is conscientious.



## CHAPTER IV

### EMERSON

SOME thinkers are so candid and so wise in formulating their relations in life, that they become the best critics of themselves and their generation. What a man a hundred years later may say of them is truest when it is but a slight revision of their own account of their personal destinies and surroundings. Emerson is one of these completely self-expressed recorders of life. Did any one else ever more thoroughly obey the Socratic injunction? Emerson epitomizes his era and his neighbourhood. His mind is open to the prevailing winds of thought from all quarters. As he says of Swedenborg, he lies abroad upon his times; his significance absorbs a multitude of lesser men; his eminence grows more imposing as the ephemeral which was his daily partner sinks out of sight. In his later years he made some "Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England," to which one has but to add for him "*quorum pars maxima fuit*," in order to make it the best possible introduction to his life and writings.

"The key to the period" — the period of his young manhood — "appeared to be," he says, "that the mind had become aware of itself." After Kant those who pursued philosophy analyzed their instrument of thought, scrutinized with a mixture of credulous wonder and scepticism the mental

ground on which religions and philosophies are erected. Emerson, poet, mystic, ethical enthusiast, is an alert critic of his own intellectual processes, a keen judge of contemporary modes of thought and of the general motives of human conduct. Whoever tries to account for his genius, to rearrange it in the intellectual landscape, to complete it here and depress it there by later standards and by right of historical knowledge, will find that Emerson has estimated his leading ideas and his place in a certain moment of human thought with astonishing insight.

The chapter on "Idealism" in "Nature" is a compact and lucid summary of the type of philosophy then prevalent; you will look in vain for a better statement of it in any latter-day history of philosophic development. Emerson's "Lecture on the Times," read when he was thirty-eight years old, and his lecture on the "New England Reformers," delivered three years later, place local events and ideas then dominant in the position that they occupy as seen from our perspective. His intellectual horizon often seems to be at the same distance from him as from us. Much that we would say of him he has said of the forces that influenced him and included him.

Between Emerson's time and ours intervenes a revolution that came to its crisis about the year 1860, the complete triumph of the scientific spirit in all minds that are abreast of their age and in fullest possession of current culture. This revolution has entirely reordered philosophic and economic theory and has made transcendental idealism as obsolete as scholastic theology — though, to be sure, there are multitudes of men who still live in antique faiths and ignore the forefront

of human thought. To see Emerson clearly we must pass back through this revolution and emerge on his side of it; without that act of the historical imagination we shall misunderstand our differences from him.

Before Emerson's time Kant's laborious and honest *Kritik*, based on the revolutionary rationalism of Hume, had laid the foundations for a scientific study of mind. But the world was not ready to carry its implications out to their disconcerting conclusion, which is the destruction of religious and philosophic myth. In a sense Kant himself was not ready; he hedged a little, and his followers hedged still more. The age was romantic, and philosophy had to make concessions to religion. In the solid structure which Kant so cautiously and courageously erected, he left a breach opened toward vague unknowables. Ethical and political philosophy, called upon by the practical powers of Church and State to assume some of the intellectual police functions which liberalism had wrested from religion, entered through the breach and took the Kantian stronghold. Post-Kantian philosophy became a wonder-wander world of conventional ethics in poetic motley and learned garb, a solemn masquerade in which kaiser, pope, banker, and landlord were honoured guests. An unknowable Absolute and the Christian deity merged in a god too indistinct for any one to be sceptical about and too impersonal to be held responsible for the world of fact.

The world of fact was a very dismal place. Emerson, confirmed optimist, describes it with a bold hostility that no recent indictment could exceed. "In the law courts," he says, "crimes of fraud have taken the place of crimes of force.

The stockholder has stepped into the place of the warlike baron. The nobles shall not any longer, as feudal lords, have power of life and death over the churls, but now in another shape as capitalists, shall in all love and peace eat them up as before. Nay, government itself becomes the resort of those whom government was invented to restrain."

In Boston, where Emerson is now a respectable local hero, the barons are stronger than ever, and their vassals, disguised as State Militia, are defending the Castle of Seven-per-Cent. in the name of government, law and order. Emerson had remarkable flashes of insight into the motives of a social period which has not yet terminated. His way of saying what he saw was seldom so plain as the foregoing passage; it usually took a symbolic metaphorical shape. "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind." In England and America, conservatism, that is, the interests of those in comfortable circumstances of property, was in complete control. "Its fingers clutch the fact," says Emerson, "and it will not open its eyes to see a better fact." Commercial authority permitted liberalism and humanitarianism so long as they did not threaten to upset the existing régime of plutonic tyranny. Authority encouraged philosophy so long as philosophy remained too difficult or too unworldly to be dangerous. In Germany the philosopher was taught to utter discreetly and in innocuously abstract terms any conclusion of his metaphysic which might seem to question the authority of king and priest. It was Hegel's glorification of monarchy, the friendliness to political reaction which is inherent in his philosophy, that made him in due time the official voice of

Prussian wisdom. In France the failure of the Revolution and the monstrous Napoleonic drama had left thought depressed, cynical and factional. In New England the austerity of Puritan ethics was a cloak for commercial trickery which even our brutal times cannot regard with moral satisfaction, and which we have therefore agreed, out of timid tenderness for old families, to forget or deny. The Boston merchant was a strong supporter of slavery; radical philosophy was either impotent or insincere; and education, nominally popular, was in the hands of ministers, lawyers and the well-to-do. In "The American Scholar," which tells what education ought to be, Emerson has revealed the poverty and narrowness of the schools of his time; and in the lecture called "The Conservative" he has summed up with marvellous power the influence of commercial interest upon thought:

"The conservative assumes sickness as a necessity, and his social frame is a hospital; his total legislation is for the present distress, a universe in slippers and flannels, with bib and papspoon, swallowing pills and herb-tea. Sickness gets organized as well as health, and vice as well as virtue. Now that a vicious system of trade has existed so long, it has stereotyped itself in the human generation, and misers are born. And now that sickness has got such a foothold, leprosy has grown cunning, has got into the ballot-box; the lepers outvote the clean; society has resolved itself into a Hospital Committee, and all its laws are quarantine. If any man resist and set up a foolish hope he has entertained as good against the general despair, Society frowns on him, shuts him out of her opportunities, her granaries, her refectories, her

water and bread, and will serve him a sexton's turn. Conservatism takes as low a view of every part of human action and passion. Its religion is just as bad; a lozenge for the sick; a dolorous tune to beguile the distemper; mitigations of pain by pillows and remedies; pardons for sin, funeral honours — never self-help, renovation and virtue. Its social and political action has no better aim; to keep out wind and weather, to bring the week and the year about, and make the world last our day; not to sit on the world and steer it; not to sink the memory of the past in the glory of a new and more excellent creation; a timid cobbler and patcher, it degrades whatever it touches. The cause of education is urged in this country with the utmost earnestness — on what ground? Why on this, that the people have the power, and if they are not instructed to sympathize with the intelligent, reading, trading, and governing class, inspired with a taste for the same competitions and prizes, they will upset the fair pageant of Judicature, and perhaps lay a hand on the sacred muniments of wealth itself, and new-distribute the land. Religion is taught in the same spirit. The contractors who were building a road out of Baltimore, some years ago, found the Irish labourers quarrelsome and refractory to a degree that embarrassed the agents and seriously interrupted the progress of the work. The corporation were advised to call off the police and build a Catholic chapel, which they did; the priest presently restored order, and the work went on prosperously. Such hints, be sure, are too valuable to be lost. If you do not value the Sabbath, or other religious institutions, give yourself no concern about maintaining them.



They have already acquired a market value as conservators of property; and if priest and church-member should fail, the chambers of commerce and the presidents of the banks, the very innholders and landlords of the county, would muster with fury to their support."

By Emerson's time a few thinkers in America and elsewhere had discovered that the high phrases of the American Revolution had been but catch-words to enlist the support of the people in a war to transfer the ownership of America from British landlords and traders to American landlords and traders; school, church, and politics conspired to keep the people worshipping mythically noble forefathers and cheering loudly for the shadow of rights whose substance they had never embraced.

From these conditions philosophy and such religious aspiration as had broken free from the oldest conventions took refuge in an idealistic account of life which left much of life out and created for itself a stronghold amid the clouds. The romantic spirit absorbed the best minds of the time, for only in romance was man free or at least unconscious of his chains. Most of the eloquent expression of the day in England and America and Germany is wholly in romantic terms. At the opening of the nineteenth century Fichte, a romantic in scientific guise, was the leading figure in German philosophy. Hegelism was to follow but was not yet ripe for its holy Metternichian alliances with the Kaiser and the Fatherland (that is, banker and landlord) against the revolutionary spirit.

Fichte had had his quarrels with the clergy and had been

routed from his position in the University of Jena. In Berlin he joined the literary romantics, toned down his atheism, and by his patriotic eloquence at the time of the Napoleonic invasion he became a national hero; thus this ethical idealism achieved popularity. It was carried to England by Coleridge and Carlyle, and came to America by way of Carlyle's writings and James Marsh's American edition of Coleridge's "Aids to Reflection." These works are not pure Fichtean, but a medley of various German post-Kantians. In them, however, Fichte is dominant, and his influence is the most clearly discernible of the various philosophies that underlie New England Transcendentalism and the work of Emerson.

In the sentimentally ethical universe which it pleased Fichte to create, high souls could escape from the world of fact and find at least two yearnings of human nature well satisfied, the desire to contemplate the universe as an æsthetically admirable whole and the heroic wish to be held morally responsible. This ethical and æsthetic transcendentalism drew up into itself the moral enthusiasms of the leading imaginations; though they now and again descended to the earth to attack a specific abuse like black slavery they were in the main aloof, serenely self-centred and ineffectual. They were wont, as Emerson said of them (and in his letters to Carlyle he frankly and with sadly smiling regret includes himself among the fruitless flowers of speculation) — they were wont to make severe moral demands on every one and yet were not good fighters in the common battles of life.

Every philosopher's beliefs are in part a construction of his

own temperament; he assimilates current ideas and is the product of his time, but he selects from what is about him the thing that most fits his nature. Emerson could not have composed a lifeless philosophy even from the most inhuman development of post-Kantian metaphysics. He had little sympathy, in his most vigorous moments, with such a view as a British Hegelian expresses, that the special work of philosophy "is to comprehend the world, not to try to make it better." It is, however, significant, perhaps fortunate, that the kind of idealism which came to him and his neighbours most powerfully, reinforced by the early health of Carlyle's ethical intensity, was the moral universe of Fichte. According to this philosophy the real world is a limitless arena in which the soul can realize its duties by conflict. Struggle is the source of morality. Virtue means good action, the overcoming of something in external nature or human nature. Duty is the only true thing in the world of phenomena. Emerson's phrase reflecting this idea is "the sovereignty of ethics." Things are what we ought to make them, and that is the only sense in which they really exist. Such is Fichte's simplest message, and it is central in Emerson's thought, whether or not he knew or cared for Fichte's complete works. The idea was in the air and it was so well adapted to Emerson's genius that it shows no more signs of having been transplanted from alien soils than the New England apple.

For Emerson philosophy retained its old meaning, love of wisdom. If it have no influence on conduct it is worthless; if it have a bad influence on conduct it is bad philosophy.

He treats academic metaphysicians with mild irony: "Who has not looked into a metaphysical book, but what sensible man ever looked twice?" "Ask what is best in our experience, and we shall say a few pieces of plain dealing with wise people. Our conversation once and again has apprised us that we belong to better circles than we have yet beheld; that a mental power invites us whose generalizations are more worth for joy and effect than anything that is now called philosophy or literature." That phrase holds his own value. His generalizations are more worth for joy and effect than much that is now called philosophy and literature. Matthew Arnold tells us that Emerson is a great teacher of life but not a great man of letters, and not a philosopher because he made no system. These distinctions are clear and just if we grant the definitions of the terms used. But Emerson, like every man of genius, strains academic definitions; and instead of holding to their tarnished uses, we find that to learn what he is demands a new understanding of terms, that academic corruptions must be scoured off and the true colour of the metal revealed.

What is philosophy? At the present time it seems to be the study of dead men's thoughts, pursued by small groups of teachers (in those institutions which, Emerson held, are "ludicrously" called universities), and not participated in to any great extent except by students who intend in turn to become teachers. But what historically is philosophy? The answer may be found in a posthumous book by William James (a true successor of Emerson in that he also was a lover of wisdom in the old humane sense, and relieved us of

much accumulated metaphysic by athletically pitching it out the window): "A view of anything is termed philosophic just in proportion as it is broad and connected with other views, and as it uses principles not proximate or intermediate but ultimate and all embracing, to justify itself. Any very sweeping view of the world is a philosophy in this sense . . . an intellectualized attitude toward life. Professor Dewey well describes the constitution of all the philosophies that actually exist when he says that philosophy expresses a certain attitude, purpose, and temper of conjoined will and intellect, rather than a discipline whose boundaries can be neatly marked off."

In a German historic handbook of philosophy we find much space given to Xenophanes, a satirist, a Greek Alexander Pope, and much space given to Parmenides, a didactic poet. These amateur thinkers of an elder age hold a place in philosophy; but the poetic preacher who wrote "The Conduct of Life" is a footnote person in the same handbook. Jonathan Edwards, who erected his superstitions into a magnitudinous if not an architectural pile, is an admitted philosopher; but Emerson whose essay on "Fate" is alive and inspiring after half a century of disputation on the free-will puzzle, is but reluctantly acknowledged as a philosopher. In the official rolls of learning, then, a poetic fragment that is very old and not read by anybody but professors is philosophy; and a system, though it be a tissue of superstition and bad reasoning, especially if it be written obscurely, is philosophy: but a modern poetic preacher, whose writings are drenched with philosophy and whose philosophy has secured

a vicarious immortality by its allegiance with literary beauty, is not entitled to the mystic degree. The hall of philosophy at Harvard is named after Emerson, and that is a good sign. Perhaps the words of "The American Scholar" may in time be understood even in Cambridge.

Emerson is one of the few men in the nineteenth century whose discourses on philosophic subjects remain inspiring through many changes of belief; moreover it is Emerson who, with Goethe and Carlyle, distilled the quintessential value of some modes of Greek and German thought which in their original system have fallen to the ground. He was a humanist. He restored philosophy to the uses of life. He borrowed Plato from the schoolmen long enough to prove that Socrates was a human being. Emerson's failure to systematize may be due in part to his sane perception that system does not ensure truth, that this perplexing world will not contract itself and comfortably revolve within the geometric sphere of any logical scheme of thought. Emerson is like Plato, whose dialogues, though they may be systematized by critics, are not in themselves systematic, but are conversational and suggestive discourses. This modern lyceum lecturer talks about one broad general subject at a time, fills each theme with compressed (but not dried) matter drawn from all manner of sources, leaves his auditor with the net results of many philosophies, and passes on without a formal conclusion. Like Bacon he is an all-inquiring tourist in the region of other minds. He reads for his private uses and is far from what he calls a sycophantic and mendicant reader.

It is because he dips from so many streams of thought,



because he condenses an essay into a paragraph and then inserts the paragraph into any theme that will hold it conveniently, that he is charged with being disconnected and deficient in organic structure. The truth is, his work is singularly unified, not only section for section, essay for essay, but regarded as a whole from his first lecture to his last. Matter so homogeneous as his may break up into globules like spilt mercury, but only contact is required to make instant adherence and fluid reassemblage. For forty years he preached the same sermon — character, conduct, spiritual energy, courageous will, resilient belief and confident illusion. Erroneous vitality is better than dead accuracy. “We have a certain instinct that where there is a great amount of life, though gross and peccant, it has its own checks and purifications, and will be found at last in harmony with moral laws.”

His laudation of the will to live is a reaction against the old theological idea that will is a deplorable fact, that it is the cause of the individual's sinful unfitness in a universe perfect except for the unique vileness of man and so the explanation (which does not explain) of our inharmoniousness with an omniscient and beneficent god. Seen in the light of the philosophies that developed after him, Emerson, a gentle country parson, is not unlike a Nietzsche to the Calvinistic Schopenhauers. But necessarily the terms in which he expresses his revolt against the degrading humilities and soul sickness of theology are the terms of the religion which he has outgrown. “In spite of our imbecility and terror and ‘the universal decay of religion, etc. etc.’ the moral sense re-

appears to-day with the same morning newness that has been from of old the fountain of beauty and strength." The source and master of the universe is still the God of Jacob, a force for righteousness fighting on our side of the battle, though he appears under the frigidly impersonal designation: "Oversoul."

Emerson falls into confusions of thought; his incurable optimism simply cannot dispose of the problem of evil; yet these failings are only the inherent weakness of the entire idealistic philosophy of his time and of the revised Christianity known as Unitarianism. None of the orderly exponents of idealistic monism ever got round the stump of vice and misery. Evil is the germ of decay which eats through all their systems. The main difference between Emerson's confession of faith and the elaborate reasonings of Spinoza, of Fichte, of Hegel, is that they, creating and defending systems which pretend to completeness, must explain inconsistencies away, whereas Emerson blandly accepts inconsistencies. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen, and philosophers and divines." The greater inconsistencies, too terrible to be foolish, Emerson ignores. "Omit the negative propositions," he says — an injunction which is abhorrent to an honest, intrepid mind, and which, of course, he vigorously disobeyed himself! It is doubtful if he compared his essay on "Fate" with his chapter on "Idealism," pared them down to their issues so that their essential contradiction might be seen.

"Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country

and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, in an aged creeping past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul." And in the essay on "Worship" he says: "Strong men believe in cause and effect. The man was born to do it, and his father was born to be the father of him and of his deed; and by looking narrowly you shall see there was no luck in the matter; but it was all a problem in arithmetic or an experiment in chemistry. The curve of the flight of the moth is preordained, and all things go by number, rule and weight."

An entire everlastingly finished universe, painted once for all on eternity, precludes the possibility that man can will anything or introduce a particle of novelty into the world by desiring one thing more than another. Yet the essay on "Fate" is a bold problem-cutting declaration that the world is continuously remaking, that the human will, however small, is the very treasure of life, "gallantly contending against the universe of chemistry"; and the eloquent peroration addressed to Blessed Unity and Beautiful Necessity magnificently begs the question. The Emersonian paradoxes: "Fate has its lord, limitation its limits," "Power attends and antagonizes Fate," "the hero masters destiny by believing in it;" "Fate involves melioration"—these are no verbal quips, but a sincere account of the matter; for the matter itself, the Free-will-determinism problem, is a paradox foisted on life by technical philosophy and by the baseless dogmas of religion.

Emerson is inconsistent because life is inconsistent, and a fair attempt to describe it from one point of observation, assumed to-day, will challenge to-morrow's statement of

another aspect. The disciplines of life instruct us that "good thoughts are no better than good dreams unless they be executed." Yet the end of the essay on "Success," a sermon to chide hasty activity and that spirit in American life which is condensed in the abominable motto, "Do it now," concludes with this approval of the static contemplative ideal: "The inner life sits at home, and does not learn to do things nor value these facts at all. 'Tis a quiet, wise perception. It loves truth because it is itself real; it loves right, it knows nothing else; but it makes no progress . . . it lies in the sun and broods on the world." Emerson does not say that this is the only good ideal, but he phrases it strongly enough to show that there, for the day, for the purposes of that essay, his heart is at home.

Emerson gives the antidote to each moral or immoral overdose; his inconsistencies show violently when single sentences are confronted with other sentences from distant parts of his work. Inherently he is as consistent as the human being ever is who tries to tell how God made the world and is managing it at the present difficult hour. Emerson would have us grasp the metaphysical nettle and rob it of its sting. It is life we are bent on, not problems. Whatever the ultimate constitution of the world, we know what plain human virtues are necessary to go bravely and profitably through life. We cannot dispel evil by wishing it away, as Emerson seems to say in some of his healthful, high-noon weddings with the sun, but we can see what may be made of evil, how much of it may be disregarded, evaded and overcome. This page from Emerson and Carlyle and Fichte was written centuries

ago by Epictetus. We can try our muscles on evil and turn it to account, thus realizing and reaffirming the law of compensation.

Christianity preaches original sin; Emerson, like the Unitarians, preaches original virtue. His serene manner of reversing some of the facts of life so that they all face one way is, at some moments, irritating, but in the end and on the whole it is exhilarating. It is a poetic emotional way of reading life; it is Browning's way and is wholly satisfactory in him until overzealous admirers try to make a philosopher of him and reduce his thoughts to prose, thereby killing the poetry. Emerson is a prose rhapsodist and psalmist; and though he is never quite free from the atmosphere of lyceum platform and pulpit, though he uses the vocabulary of theology and philosophy, he is impatient of argument and sits augustly above the planes of logic. This would justly exclude him from the company of philosophers, but for one thing: the philosophers themselves are not logical, and they play fast and loose with facts.

In the chapter called "Considerations by the Way" in "The Conduct of Life," Emerson says: "In front of these sinister facts, the first lesson of history is the good of evil." Then follow three pages of historic illustration, in which events are so simply, so cheaply, motivated, that one knows that history was not made in any such story-book fashion. But as Emerson says of the old physicians, the "meaning holds if the physiology is a little mythical." He often carries his points in a high-handed manner. If any illustration be not grounded in reality, he will cordially yield it and proceed undismayed.

We know from the memoirs of his contemporaries that Emerson's personality carried authority, that even when they did not fully understand him his audiences followed him because his character fascinated them and persuaded them to believe him. With his death a magic passed from his work which the modern reader cannot recall. Certainly he was one of those to be included in Hazlitt's list of persons one would wish to have seen. Those who heard him felt the ennobling spell of his presence; the more vigorous Carlyle bowed his head for once and acknowledged a superior. Moreover, the audiences of those days heard from Emerson many witty and colloquial asides which do not appear in his writings and which mitigated the continuously lofty tone and fetched him back from a starry aloofness. "I do not," he says, "often speak to public questions; they are odious and hurtful and it seems like meddling and leaving your work. I have my own spirits in prison; spirits in deeper prisons, whom no man visits if I do not." But he did speak to good purpose on public questions; and his asides, reported by those who heard him, and his letters reveal the practical shrewd Yankee in him, a man among his neighbours as well as a preacher from the hilltop.

His high thinking sometimes loses itself in the skies as when he says: "There are moments when the affections rule and absorb a man and make his happiness dependent on a person or persons. But in health the mind is presently seen again — its overarching vault bright with the galaxies of immutable lights, and the warm loves and fears that swept over us as clouds must lose their finite character and blend with God,



to attain their own perfection." The seer who lives at ease in such astronomical heights wrote to a friend: "Everything wakes this morning except my darling boy." And he wrote to Carlyle of the farmers, traditionally the honest backbone of the country: "Horace Greeley does their thinking for them at a dollar a head." Emerson walked on the roads of a New England town and read the daily newspapers.

Sanctified airs he abominated, and he must have disconcerted some rapt admirers who approached him in adoring mood, by his whimsical air-clearing good sense. He was reserved but not timid. He was not afraid "to write things down coarsely as they stand." The vigour of Emerson's attacks on plain daily political hypocrisy and commercial corruption is doubled by the habitual serenity of the man. A saint on fire is a more persuasive attorney for the prosecution than the chronic objector. The haloed Emerson has been well respected and remembered, but the citizen Emerson has been obscured by the light of the aureole. To read him in his entirety, his letters and journals and the reports of his real as well as his professional "conversations," is to be become acquainted with a very great specimen of the human race. Just to hint the flaw which is necessary to a convincing portrait, one may object gently to his blowing hot and cold on Whitman; he did not quite stand to the guns of his first conviction that Whitman was at the beginning of "a great career," and his annoyance at Whitman's use in good faith of his emphatic words of approval was quite natural and human. The rest of us common mortals would have been more annoyed, and we should not have had the brains to see Whit-

man's merits at once, as Emerson saw them without waiting for other people to point them out.

Emerson is one of the few great preachers who do not stand small in their pulpits and who do not lay their greatness aside in the robing-room after the service. His gracious and substantial character is behind his sermons. Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin have faults that repel the congregation even though it comes willingly to the next discourse. Arnold's intellectual snobbery, Carlyle's raucous ill-temper and his falsification of verifiable matters of fact, Ruskin's querulous superiority, his prolix over-explanatory patronage of us naughty little schoolboys—these faults no fault of Emerson's resembles or equals. He preached culture. Like Goethe he *was* culture. He impels us to lofty thinking by exemplifying it in our presence; whereas Arnold's insistence on culture (itself a "droning preponderance" such as Emerson thought true culture should modulate) makes a healthy man yearn to commit some gross vulgarity. Arnold, who will lead us to the excellence of Homer, spends half his time laying a ferule on Homer's translators and biographers, so that one wearies of the school-room smell and longs for the shining strand before Troy. Carlyle, who will improve his country, assassinates it. "England," he says, "is dying of inanition." It obstinately refuses to die but reveals a quite unphilosophic will to survive its grave diseases and justify Emerson's buoyant prediction: "Let who will fail, England will not." If Emerson has a deaf spot in his ear and can be guilty of a puzzling stupidity when he says, "France where poet never grew," at least he does not wipe France from the map of Europe,

but writes a hearty essay on Montaigne. Emerson glorifies religion because it is a natural and beautiful function of humanity to worship excellence. Carlyle hurls religion at us because we are miserable fools that need to be policed, and so we quite cheerfully fling it back. Ruskin, a theologian at heart and by the insuperable tradition of his youthful discipline, must be always haranguing us into obedience to himself and other lofty persons; he warns us, when we would be free from superstitions and miseries, that the fly on the ceiling is the perfect embodiment of freedom. Though Emerson has no delusions about the multitude, and though in one place he talks like a Malthusian and an aristocrat\* he is not long in this mood.

He sees the onward unconquerable process of life. Man "like a wounded oyster mends his shell with pearl." He regenerates from within, because the life in him urges him to keep on, and the knocks he gets show him how to live better, and not, as Ruskin seems to think, and as the priestly mind ever teaches, because man has high ideas thrust down on him from upper circles.

Emerson is with the stream of American life and the

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\*"Leave this hypocritical prating about the masses. Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered, but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide and break them up and draw individuals out of them. The worst of charity is that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving. Masses! The calamity is the masses. I do not wish any mass at all, but honest men only, lovely, sweet accomplished women only, and no shovel-handed, narrow-brained, gin-drinking million stockingers and lazaroni at all. If government knew how, I should like to see it check, not multiply the population. When it reaches its true law of action, every man that is born will be hailed as essential." *Conduct of Life*, p. 237. Shade of Nietzsche attend!

thought of the world, not against it. He condemns errors and calls them by plain univocal names, but he does not sneer at them. He is more hopeful and undaunted than the very American spirit whose pitiful shallow successes he shows to be worthless. The remedy for bad men is good men. The cure for false theology is not new theology, but mother-wit. Life need not go Emerson's way nor heed his explicit directions. It will come out somehow to a good end by the unfolding of its own nature. He does not, like egotistic preachers, bear the weight of this world and shake a disappointed head when humanity fails to obey orders. "I have no infirmity of faith," he says, "no belief that it is of much importance what I or any man may say; I am sure that a certain truth will be said through me, though I should be dumb, or though I should try to say the reverse." He believes that the right leaders inevitably lead, though the apparently dominant legislator and money-changer are corrupt and are competent only in their own interests. "Society is a troop of thinkers, and the best heads among them take the best places." This, to be sure, is not true of any visibly present congress or university, but it is not untrue when the already lived ages of man are summed up. Emerson represents an era of excessive individualism, and his own emphasis on the single private man is extreme, but this is not the "inflamed individualism" which, he says, puts a man out of sympathy with his fellows. He seems sometimes not to understand the organic growth of society. His chapter on "Wealth" is sciolistic. In such matters Carlyle goes deeper. Emerson ascribes English prosperity and peacefulness to the

national habit of "considering that every man must take care of himself and has himself to thank if he do not maintain and improve his position in society" — a view of life, if, indeed, Englishmen have it more than other nations, which financial alliances and industrial agglomerations were even in those days proving untrue to fact.

Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance is tonic to the soul, it stirs a man to straighten up and make the best of himself. But it is blind to the mutual dependence of the parts of the social organism. "Heaven," he says, "deals with us on no representative principles; souls are not saved in bundles" — a survival in Emerson of the old doctrine of Christianity. The world was learning even then that we live and die physically and morally in bundles, and that though our "whole use of wealth needs revision and reform," yet that reform is not in the direction of an other-worldly and individualist view of it. Though wealth does not make the home, poverty often makes the home impossible. It is a fine fancy to say that he who owns the day is rich, and perhaps the man who asks to have enough of material comforts asks too much, as Emerson says, yet the demand continues, mounts increasingly, and must be answered if we are to come out of that state of society which he regards as barbarous into the state where "every industrious man can get his living without dishonest customs."

Emerson is confessedly not a practical social reformer; he sometimes seems to regard with a too dispassionate fortitude the agonies and tumults of life. He stands in sceptical sympathy aside from most of the "movements" with which

Concord was seething. "The superior mind," he says in the essay on Montaigne, "will find itself equally at odds with the evils of society and with the projects that are offered to relieve them." He addresses himself specifically to those forces which are in the individual if they are anywhere. He directs his encouraging admonitions not to collective mankind but to the single man. Sometimes his consolations are rather too cosmic, as when he assures us that we are "part of the astonishing astronomy and existing at last to moral ends and from moral causes." For the greater part, his electric incitements to better action, his applied ethics are true and virile; his liberal poetic way of asserting the old doctrine of salvation by works rings sound through any changes of the philosophic climate. "The only path of escape known in all the worlds of God is performance." "Men talk of 'mere morality' — which is much as if one should say 'poor God with nobody to help him.' . . . Let us replace sentimentalism with realism and dare to uncover those simple laws, which, be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern." That is, never mind the moral metaphysic but get at the things that count in life. The chapter on "Worship" is an essay on the insufficiency of all dogmatic religions. "I see that sensible men and conscientious men all over the world were of one religion — the religion of well doing and daring, men of sturdy truth, men of integrity and feeling for others. My inference is that there is a statement of religion possible which makes all scepticism absurd." "Everything in natural law thunders the Ten Commandments."

Emerson is always a preacher and never quite an essayist,



in the sense we mean when we speak of Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, and Stevenson. In his compression and compendiousness he is like Bacon. He has poetry, wit, humour, a genius unlike any other man's for wayward and surprising analogy, but his thoughts are assembled and emphasized for so definite a purpose that his discourses lack the apparent spontaneity of the true essay. It is hard to say what the true essay is, as hard as to say what a true poem is, but you know it when you find it; and this much can be said of it, that it is near akin to the first-rate private letter and to private talk, and that the instinct of Lamb and the deliberate art of Stevenson both achieve it. There is somewhat the same difference between one of Emerson's discourses and a perfect essay that there is between a novel in support of a thesis or a parable to prove a point, and a tale that seems told for its own sake. Emerson's anthology of ideas is grouped to a homiletic end and is not cunningly casual as if it arranged itself. This implies rather more than less construction and is against the idea, which some people hold, that Emerson is discontinuous. Sometimes his thought, sailing beautifully as a cloud and putting the reader in a mood for more of the same poetic and shimmering prose, suddenly shatters on one of his sharp points. The abrupt erectness of some phrases, many of which are now familiar and therefore doubly arresting when we encounter them, justifies in part the notion that he is incoherent. This notion is enforced by the biographical fact that he did collect fragments and put them into pigeon-holes until he had enough to make an essayful. But most essayists write that way, if the truth were told; moreover, the

Emersonian selection is such that a kind of unity is assured in advance; for a fragment, even as it is pitched into a drawer, finds its intellectual brothers there before it.

Fragmentariness is a defect that he knew well, and if he candidly found it in his own work he quite impartially and correctly found it in others. "Our books," he says, contrasting them with Swedenborg's massive expositions, "are false by being fragmentary; their sentences are *bon-mots* and not parts of natural discourse." After one understands what Emerson is driving at, one admires the skill, conscious or instinctive, with which he put his lectures together; they were effective as spoken, and they are effective now. He is, on the whole, sequential; sentence follows sentence, cumulative and coherent, the thought selected not only to the purpose which the essay avowedly aims at but to the greater end which his whole life seeks. His sentences are connected in their subterranean structure if not in their visible relations.

In making notes for passages to quote in this paper, I found that I was turning down so many dog-ears that the book grew clumsy and the indicated quotations became too numerous to use. This in itself constitutes a criticism of Emerson. One thing more that I discovered also constitutes a criticism of him, namely, that to pull the jewels out of his mosaic, though it make the despoiler rich indeed, does disturb his pattern; it is a mosaic, but it is designed. He knew perfectly well what he was about. He hitched his wagon of progress to many stars, well knowing that people would remember the stars. The stellar attachment has not been

severed by time, and if you read Emerson at all and come on a starry thought in any book, a good bit of Emersonian discourse will trail into your mind.

There is amazingly much in him. He gathers into one discourse the wisdom of twenty sages (or such of their wisdom as happened to appeal to him, and he was an unerring chooser), and he unites them to his purpose because his fundamental thought is unified; he embraces his subject, surrounds and contains it. His epigram is the true sort; its motive is concision, not cleverness. He is like Socrates with the interlocutor's part of the conversation left out; you silently ask questions and make retorts, and he answers you in the course of the page. He develops point upon point, apparently unsystematic at times, but leading to a foreseen conclusion. He is a master of the finest art for readers who will give their attention to their reading and meet a good thinker halfway, the art of suggestion. You must know something to read him and you must have had an attack of philosophy and got over it to understand what a great essential philosopher he is, despite the professional philosophers who have not recovered from their attack but have nursed it as a chronic state of mind. Walter Bagehot in "Physics and Politics" puts the matter well, and he gives a new twist to the word "cultivated" that may surprise the "Philistines of culture."

"Unproved abstract principles without number," says Bagehot, "have been eagerly caught up by sanguine men, and then carefully spun out into books and theories, which were to explain the whole world. But the world goes clear against these abstractions, and it must do so, as they require it to

go in antagonistic directions. The mass of a system attracts the young and impresses the unwary; but cultivated people (*sic*) are very dubious about it. They are ready to receive hints and suggestions, and the smallest real truth is ever welcome. But a large book of deductive philosophy is much to be suspected. No doubt the deductions may be right; in most writers they are so; but where did the premises come from? Who is sure that they are the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, of the matter in hand? Who is not almost sure beforehand that they will contain a strange mixture of truth and error, and therefore that it will not be worth while to spend life in reasoning over their consequences? In a word, the superfluous energy of mankind has flowed over into philosophy, and has worked into big systems what should have been left as little suggestions."

Emerson takes the little suggestions out of big systems and plants them in his prose. He "angles with himself" in the pools of wisdom and in his reader's sympathies.

That statistic which it pleased Doctor Holmes to make and which shows that Emerson makes three thousand references to over eight hundred writers, sages, and other great men, does not pulverize him into a Bartlett's Quotations. His confident mind grasps, if not the whole universe, at least that part of it in the disclosure of which he spent fifty years remeditating and rephrasing. His illustrations from current sciences and discoveries are often like Lyly's natural history, naïve and fictitious. He uses illustration like a poet, not for itself, but to place his thought picturesquely before you,

in the manner of the parable-maker. Many of his concrete examples are from every-day life; the fibrous roots of his analogies shoot through his native soil. He plays to and fro between heaven and earth, pointing to an angel behind a New England rock and then to a principle of mundane ethics working out in the vast skies. His combination of the homely and the starry gives at once foothold and wings to the reader's imagination. "Slow, slow to learn the lesson that there is but one depth, but one interior, and that is — his purpose. When joy or calamity or genius shall show him it, the woods, the farms, the city shopmen and cab drivers, indifferently with prophet or friend, will mirror back to him its unfathomable depth, its populous solitude." The sweep of that sentence from woods, farms and shopmen to populous solitudes, is a typical specimen of Emerson's melody and volitation. He has many such sentences, many paragraphs and pages of such prose harmonies.

The texture of his thought is so richly metaphorical, he is such a master of analogy that you wonder, as you wonder in reading Lamb and Newman and Ruskin, why a man of high feelings and noble eloquence, saturated with the poetry of life and the words of the great poets, should yet fail to be a poet. Emerson yearned ardently to be a poet and attain to "that splendid dialect," but his verse is inconsiderable beside his prose. It expresses his leading thoughts, but they are again and again better expressed in his essays. Perplexing it is to pass from the rigid cramped verses that precede the sections of "The Conduct of Life" into the grand resonances of the essays themselves. For some reason he never learned

the art of verse. A few of his poems, like the "Concord Hymn," "The Humble Bee," and two or three perfect quatrains, place him among the genuine poets whom we call minor because the major poets are so miraculously above them. You come frequently upon lines of Emerson's that are near to poetry but which instantly confess their failure by reminding you of the better poets. For example, the flower says:

The self-same Power that brought me there brought you.

The reader's mind rushes beyond Emerson to Blake's perfect "Tiger, Tiger."

As Emerson delicately says of Thoreau, the thyme and marjoram are not quite transmuted into honey. To him may be applied his own lines at the beginning of the poem, "Destiny":

That you are fair or wise is vain,  
Or strong, or rich, or generous;  
You must add the untaught strain  
That sheds beauty on the rose.

Always strong, rich, wise, generous, sometimes quaintly fair and sweet, Emerson's poetry lacks the untaught, unteachable strain of ultimate poetry. We remember it chiefly because it is Emerson's. If this seem grudging, let it be remembered that it implies a standard worthy of him, a standard which he himself raised in his many magnificent passages about poets and poetry.

The true Emerson is the splendid prose, of which almost



every page shows his "divination, grand aims, hospitality of soul."

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston, May 25, 1803. He died in Concord, Massachusetts, April 27, 1882. His father, pastor of the First Church in Boston, died when Emerson was eight years old, leaving the family poor. Emerson was never well-to-do, but was passing rich on a few hundred a year, most of which he earned by lecturing, which he called "peddling his literary pack of notions." He went to Harvard and studied for the ministry. In 1829 he was called to the Second Church in Boston. Three years later he resigned, because he did not believe in the communion rite. His sermon on "The Lord's Supper" (now published in "Miscellanies"), in which he announced his intention of withdrawing from the ministry, may be regarded as his first essay; the unperturbed candour and intellectual integrity and the modestly authoritative way of saying things are there first revealed. His anxieties affected his usually excellent health, and he made a voyage to the Mediterranean. On this journey and a later one he met some of the distinguished European men of letters, notably Carlyle. "English Traits" is a record of his travels. The rest of his life he spent at Concord, which he left only to give lectures. He contributed to the *Dial*, which he edited for some years, and to the *Atlantic Monthly*, and from time to time assembled his lectures and poems in small volumes. In 1829 he married Ellen Louise Tucker; she died in 1832. In 1835 he married Lydia Jackson.

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His chief works are: *Historical Discourse at Concord*, 1835; *Lecturers on Biography* (spoken discourses), 1835; *Nature*, 1836; *The American Scholar* (Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard, delivered), 1837; *Essays, First Series*, 1841; *Essays, Second Series*, 1844; *The Young American: A Lecture*, 1844; *Poems*, 1847, 1865; *Miscellanies*, 1849; *Representative Men*, 1850; *English Traits*, 1856; *The Conduct of Life*, 1860; *May-Day*, 1867; *Society and Solitude*, 1870; *Parnassus* (an anthology of poetry), 1874; *Letters and Social Aims*, 1875; *Poems, Revised*, 1878; *The Fortune of the Republic*, 1878; *The Sovereignty of Ethics*, 1878; *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, 1883; *Natural History of the Intellect*, 1893; *Journals, 1820-1872*, edited by E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes (6 vols. so far published), 1909, 1910, 1911.

The best "Life" of Emerson is by J. E. Cabot. The finest critical and biographical study is that by G. E. Woodberry. Excellent essays are those by J. R. Lowell, Matthew Arnold, and J. J. Chapman.

## CHAPTER V

### HAWTHORNE

LITERATURE in its romantic mood, that is, humanity in its romantic mood, looks at life with its eyes focused on distant visions. The foreground of actuality is blurred. When the vision is strong, it sees more beautiful things than the sharpest perception of realism can find in the immediate spectacle which it strives to penetrate, for then romanticism is poetry. Romance takes great risks. When it succeeds, its triumph is supreme; all men come under its spell and the most sullen realist cannot deny it. When its vision is weak, it is the most lamentable falsifier; its eye is dissolute and drunken, and it is cried out upon by honesty and intellectual courage.

The romantic, looking beyond life, turns in two directions, either to a timeless land that never can exist or to a past that never did exist. The typical expression of modern romance is the historical novel, in which the unwarranted fundamental assumption is that life was once more interesting than it is now. Taking a few picturesque historic facts for its ground-cloth, romance embroiders pretty pictures at will, childishly indifferent to fact. Realism says: "I will draw my neighbour's soul." Romance says: "I will draw the soul of some person who lived long ago and was more entertaining than my neighbour," or "I will draw some aspect of soul that never

was in human shape, some twist of mind, terrible, fantastic or sheerly beautiful." Both methods are good — when they are adopted by powerful writers. But romance has been so abused in English fiction of the nineteenth century that some of us are heartily tired of it, and there are few modern romancers who still hold us.

Hawthorne is one of the few. If his work is not great, it is at least sincere, beautiful, free from false notes, fragile amid the stronger geniuses of his age, yet thoroughly manly and dignified. He is a born romancer, consistent and never in doubt as to what he was trying to do; writing, it seems, at least in his earlier years, to please himself. He shrinks from life. Personally he is shy and secluded, though not so morbid as to brawnier natures he may appear. His artistic imagination, as fine a gift as was ever bestowed on any man except the great poets, is baffled, even wounded by the rougher human facts amid which he passes his life. The sketch of the Custom House which introduces "The Scarlet Letter" is so shrewdly realistic that it roused some local resentments, but it is quite singular in his work; he wrote little else in the same spirit. His notebooks of travel contain some clear flashes of present reality, yet for the most part they offer the obverse side of the romantic imagination, its disillusion, its sadness for dreams unfulfilled. So strongly does this mood of sensitive chagrin express itself in his reflections on English life that Hawthorne, most modest and gentlest of men, who looked upon social conditions at home and abroad with melancholy indifference, was thought by some of our British cousins to have made a Yankee attack on

the mother-country. Hawthorne himself was puzzled that any one should attach weight to his opinions, which are so lacking in any spirit of aggression or even of analysis. He was recording moods. He was aloof from the English, just as he was aloof from Yankees and Southerners. The quarrel between the American states merely deepened his gravity and filled him with silent unhappiness. For the political grapplings of the time he had neither mind nor heart. Neither on one side nor on the other of that great conflict which shook the souls of his contemporaries did he say anything which is now worth remembering. The accidents of friendship enlisted his literary competence to write a "campaign biography" of Franklin Pierce. It is as if Shelley had been college chum of some British statesman and had written whatever it is in England that corresponds to American campaign biographies.

In the preface of "The Marble Faun" Hawthorne says: "Italy, as the site of this romance, was chiefly valuable to him as affording a sort of poetic or fairy precinct, where actualities would not be so terribly insisted upon as they are, and must needs be, in America. No author, without a trial, can conceive the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land."

Mr. Henry James seems to accept Hawthorne's view that his limitations were objective, and that he might have done greater work if he had lived somewhere else. When Mr.

James wrote his excellent little book, he had exchanged one provincialism for another in the pursuit of his own literary career, and this explains, perhaps, why he presses the idea that America was not rich in material for the maker of stories. His list of things which America did not have where-with to stimulate the literary imagination leaves his "dear native land" more shiveringly naked than does Hawthorne's own complaint of his country's romantic poverty. It is not strange that Hawthorne's temperament should be dissatisfied with the life about him, but it is strange that Mr. James, a confirmed realist and analytic critic, should not see that the dissatisfaction was due to the nature of Hawthorne's genius, that he did not depend on his environment or make full use of it. For the most part he simply ignored it. He liked what no country in any era presents in the daylight glare of actuality.

Naturally, one fond of haunted castles, ghosts, and unearthly mysteries does not seek them on Broadway, New York, which is two hundred years old, nor yet on the Strand, in London, which is a thousand years old. He seeks them in his mind and in written legend, the only places where they exist. Every society, new or old, is rich in shadows, tragedies, picturesque and gloomy wrongs as old as Adam. The true novelist sees these contrasts, these terrible depths, and makes stories of them, but not the romancer of any race or age whose favourite haunt is a "fairy precinct." In one mood Hawthorne evidently feels that in contemporaneous and local society there is abundant material for one who can improve it, for in "The House of the Seven Gables" he says apropos of Hol-



grave: "A romance on the plan of Gil Blas, adapted to American society and manners, would cease to be a romance. The experience of many individuals among us who think it hardly worth the telling would equal the vicissitudes of the Spaniard's earlier life; while their ultimate success, or the point whither they tend, may be incomparably higher than any that a novelist would imagine for his hero."

However that may be, it is not true that Hawthorne lacked materials or that he suffered for want of literary surroundings, as Mr. James seems to think; he did not prospect the wealth that lay at his door; and after success crowned his efforts he was solitary from choice in a society that had a not inconsiderable cluster of distinguished poets and essayists. Fields had to seek him and coax his manuscript from him. The memoirs of the charming circle at Concord show that all respected him but none was intimate with him. He was a wanderer in dreams. He felt life to be stark and flat, and, deceived by the story-book pictures of Europe, he hoped, like many American youths, to find a greater world across the sea. But when he really saw Europe he was disappointed. "The Marble Faun" does not reveal the action of a starved imagination finding at last the abundant beauty it had yearned for, but is curiously cold, colder than "The Scarlet Letter."

Hawthorne carried his climate with him, his skies are neither American nor Italian. Until biography reminds you of it, you do not think of Hawthorne as a New Englander hindered or enriched by the geographic soil of his being. He held his universe in his head and was all too little impressed

by the parts of the external universe in which the collateral records show him to have worked, married and had his house.

That his clear eye was able to see momentous realities when he chose to look at them is shown by such a remark as that in "Our Old Home," where, speaking of British poverty and wealth, he says: "Is, or is not, the system wrong that gives one married pair so immense a superfluity of luxurious home and shuts a million others from any home whatever? One day or another, safe as they deem themselves, and safe as the hereditary temper of the people really tends to make them, the gentlemen of England will be compelled to face this question." The most analytic sociologist of the year 1850 could not have put it more plainly, more prophetically. It is the problem which in this year of grace the gentlemen of England and America and other countries, are being forced to face; no other question equals it in the thought of our time, and the best fiction of to-day is aware of it. Similar problems, social contrasts teeming with ideas fit for the dramatic imagination to grasp and embody in art, were present to Hawthorne's eyes if his nature had led him to look at them. The commonplace prosperity of his native land, which he thought so cheerfully uninteresting, was blotted with glooms, and the country was in the throes of tremendously exciting moral and political wars. But he who showed fine clarity of vision during the few moments when he opened his eyes to life, and who expressed every idea he wished to express with perfect lucidity, did not often face any question that we now conceive to have been crying out

at him every day. He shut himself up with spooks and queer quasi-psychological mysteries.

Fictitious literary history is wont to regard Hawthorne as the chronicler and poetic embodiment of the Puritan spirit. The Puritans were gloomy and Hawthorne was gloomy; behold, the assimilation is perfect, the heredity is self-evident. In sooth, Hawthorne was the least Puritan of the New England writers; the spirit, the character, the history of his Puritan forefathers he did not know any better than he knew the history and characters of mediæval Italians whose palaces and dungeons he gazed on without much enthusiasm. Puritanism never produces art; it kills art. As well speak of a deaf violinist as of a Puritan poet. When Milton is making poetry he is a pagan: as Puritan he either does not write or writes badly. The Puritan, like any other human being, can be made the subject of art, but he himself is artistically barren and inarticulate. The removal of Puritan inhibitions was a necessary condition of the beginning of anything like art in New England, and Hawthorne was notably free from the spirit of Puritanism. He was as far removed as Poe from any sort of ethical tradition that prevailed about him or that had prevailed before him. Indeed, he was the only one of the New Englanders who was purely artistic; and this fact is fundamentally related to the other fact that he was the only New England man of letters who was not deeply moved by black slavery or any of the burning issues of the time. He was interested in fanciful manifestations of the soul, not in genuine ethical problems; his home was fairyland, and he was especially fain of haunted woods and treacherous bogs.

He approached the Puritans just as he approached Greek Wonder Tales. "The Scarlet Letter" is in no sense a historical novel of Puritan life, any more than Macbeth is a study of the early history of Scotland. The problem of conscience is not for Hawthorne an aspect of the national mind or of the moral development of his "dear native land." It is a motive for story and legend to be wrought out in the purple colours of which he was master. The soul suffering from remorse is creepy and fascinating, and Hawthorne plays with it as Poe does, and as Stevenson does in "Markheim." People will continue to regard Hawthorne as the Blossom of Puritanism and to picture his handsomely melancholy face as a spiritual descendant of witch-hangers. That is the *cliché* of the matter and it is in all the books. But Hawthorne, fortunately, was a mildly irreverent man, charmed by the colours of things, and somewhat sceptical of the intense beliefs of his contemporaries. The theme of "The Scarlet Letter" appealed less to his moral sense than to his pictorial imagination. He turned the symbol over and over, and embroidered his story with it. It is a red spot on a gray colonial dress. It is a bloody brand on a man's breast. It is a fiery portent in the sky. Hawthorne was enamoured of its hue and he designed it cunningly like a worker in tapestry against the tortured conscience of Dimmesdale, and against Chillingworth, the skulking ghost of revenge. They are two tones of blackish purple. Pearl is another colour, not a human child, but a symbolized flower of sin, a gem in the darkness.

"What little bird of scarlet plumage may this be? Me-

thinks I have seen just such figures when the sun has been shining through a richly painted window, and tracing out the golden and crimson images across the floor. . . . Art thou one of those naughty elfs or fairies, whom we thought to have left behind us, with other relics of Papistry, in merry old England?’

“‘I am my mother’s child,’ answered the scarlet vision, ‘and my name is Pearl.’

“‘Pearl? — Ruby, rather! — or Coral — or Red Rose!’”

So speaks the old clergyman who was “nurtured at the rich bosom of the English church.” And so speaks Hawthorne, the lover of pigments.

The story of Hester is not poignantly tragic, it is not even sentimentally pathetic like Goethe’s story of Margaret. Hester Prynne is a “vaguely defined figure aloft on the place of shame.” She does not live in the real world of the Rev. Cotton Mather, his “Magnalia,” nor in the other real world of Thomas Hardy’s “Tess.” The development of her character, under suffering and the sweet influence of her child, is an abstract idea, beautifully suggested, but not the growth of a human heart in the breast of a flesh-and-blood woman. Dimmesdale is a voice, a clerical garment, a flat figure in a thin morality play, not a man whose passion has overcome a woman.

“The Scarlet Letter” is a prose poem, a development of the theme: “On a Field Sable, the Letter A, Gules.” To regard it as a novel of human character is to dissolve its enchantment. As well look for character in “The Eve of

St. Agnes" or "Christabel," or "The Fall of The House of Usher." Each person in the story is a mood, a tone. Chillingworth's approach is like a change of the weather, a pervasive shadow darkening the sky. Dimmesdale and the gloom of the forest blend not as a living man with nature but as a sad theme of music with sombre under-harmonies.

So understood, "The Scarlet Letter" is a perfect book. No word, no suggestion, detail or scene, but is set in its place with sure artistry. Hawthorne knew thoroughly the nature and the methods of his art. He did not stumble into success, but worked with his eyes open. In the early years when he was practising his craft without public recognition, destroying some tales and sending others forth upon a sea of indifference, he found out all there was to know about his capacities, and he became as sophisticated as Poe in the calculation of his effects. In the preface of "The House of the Seven Gables" he has expressed finally the spirit and intention of his work and marked clearly the boundary between the adjacent realms of Romance and Novel. That preface should be read as a general introduction to Hawthorne's work. His request that "the book be read strictly as a Romance, having a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex" is applicable to all his stories.

"The House of the Seven Gables" begins in the tone of a novel, is entered over a threshold of actuality. The history of the house is told in a daylight, matter-of-fact tone, and the opening chapters about Hepzibah and her shop, about Uncle Venner and the little boy who bought the gingerbread,



seem less like the typically Hawthornesque than like the work of the naturalistic sketchers of New England manners. But after the realistic beginning, the world becomes murky. The lover of beauty, Clifford, made imbecile by his sufferings, haunts the house like a ghost. The villain of the piece, Judge Pyncheon, stalks in and out, wearing a gloomy aura. Holgrave dabbles in hypnotism and practises his black art on the very hens in the yard. Through these shadows shine the bright but artificial beams of Phoebe's cheerful innocence. She is the Pearl-motive under a different name. The plot is tenuous. Concealed papers, opportunely discovered and enriching the oppressed and defrauded, do not convince a reader whose fancy has been clarified by the sunny laugh of Jane Austen's "Northanger Abbey." Hawthorne's genius, however, works wonders with outworn and primitive machinery, and the kaleidoscopic pictures which Maule's Well throws up are still potent to bewitch the eye.

"The Blithedale Romance" is the nearest to human life of all Hawthorne's longer stories. It is free from supernatural devices, and the characters are human. For once he found real romance, or the foundation of it, in actual life. Brook Farm was itself romantic, a society of dreamers whose extraordinary ideas and exceptional personalities set them apart from the normal world. Hawthorne does not portray Brook Farm; he distinctly denies any intention to describe biographically that ephemeral oasis in the hard desert of the American commonwealth. But the Utopia was an actual thing; it was instinctively poetic; it was composed of persons of interesting minds who aspired in their way to a cloudland

where Hawthorne, who had arrived by another route, was already at home.

Called in its time "socialistic," Brook Farm was, of course, not only remote from modern socialism but antithetic to it. It is not easy to define it in terms that have changed their colour in the course of a century of social projects and experiences. The principles of Brook Farm were not exactly those of Proudhon nor those of Fourier, but were in the air—in more senses than one. Retreat from society for personal improvement is not socialistic; it is selfish (with no immoral implication); it is excessive individualism and is as old as Oriental eremitism. The Brook Farmers sought a better mode of life for themselves and a few friends. They did not understand or attempt to study the structure of society as a whole. They helped nobody to a permanent living; they added not a jot to our knowledge of economics, except to confirm the truth which fifty experiments have taught, that small philanthropic communities cannot leaven the economic mass.

The failure of Brook Farm was due to its nescience of the individual and social bread-and-butter problem, which is the basis of life. Its value lay in the stimulating association of interesting people, which is in the long run never a complete failure, for it has the function of an informal university. When one intense mind lives with another, intellectual sparks fly. The collapse of Brook Farm contains a real lesson, which was rather pathetically ignored by the participants, whose mental reaction was that of disillusion and disappointment. Heaven had failed; therefore there was no Heaven,

or it was somewhere else. It is remarkable how little clear, candid record of the experiment the chief actors have left us. There are some pleasant reminiscences and biographies. There are some satirical reflections. But the whole history of the undertaking is veiled, as if failure had made the fine-souled and sensitive partners reluctant to talk.

No very memorable idea, no precious bit of literature flowered from Brook Farm except "The Blithedale Romance," written by one who was in it but not of it. Hawthorne, the most unfit man in New England for communistic association of any sort, visited Brook Farm, a gracious, slightly sardonic shadow, observed, said little, and went his way with a book in his head. He is pictured by some one who was there as sitting astride a chair listening with a flickering smile to an intense argument on the whole duty of man or some other inclusive topic. He contributed nothing to the discussion, but his ears were open and his eyes, dreamy but very clear, were taking in the scene. Here before him was romance, the strange in human character, the unworldly in the world. Here were people of vigorous personality, eccentric, shaded with lines not seen upon the common face of man. Once in his life he was having a genuine experience satisfying to his romantic imagination.

Through the poet, Coverdale, past the age of warmest enthusiasm and gifted with a delicate humour, Hawthorne tells his story, the best, most varied, most persuasively human of his books. It is full of a tender sympathy for the dreams of man; the dreamer who wrote it responded to other dreamers. And it is hued with a spirit found nowhere else in

Hawthorne's fiction, a fine irony, the soul of New England common-sense, but of common-sense reserved and tender, unwilling to break the spell.

The talk in the book is excellent, the best in Hawthorne's work. The characters are intelligent and full of ideas, and therefore their talk, while preserving the natural accents of human speech, can be kept at a high intellectual pitch. Not only the talk, but Hawthorne-Coverdale's reflections have a sharp edge; the romancer is for once a sharp commentator on humanity. There is in Hawthorne a more thoughtful humourist than is glimpsed through the unhuman moods of his other books. Two passages illustrate this unusual aspect of his mind — would that it had revealed itself oftener!

“The peril of our new way of life was not lest we should fail in becoming practical agriculturists but that we should probably cease to be anything else. While our enterprises lay all in theory, we had pleased ourselves with delectable visions of the spiritualization of labour. It was to be our form of prayer and ceremonial of worship. Each stroke of the hoe was to uncover some aromatic root of wisdom heretofore hidden from the sun. Pausing in the field, to let the wind exhale the moisture from our foreheads, we were to look upward and catch glimpses into the far-off soul of truth. In this point of view, matters did not turn out quite so well as we anticipated. It is very true that, sometimes, gazing casually around me, out of the midst of my toil, I used to discern a richer picturesqueness in the visible scenes of earth and sky. There was, at such moments, a novelty, an unwonted aspect, on the face of Nature, as if she had been

taken by surprise and seen at unawares, with no opportunity to put off her real look and assume the mask with which she mysteriously hides herself from mortals. But this was all. The clods of earth, which we so constantly belaboured and turned over and over, were never etherealized into thought. Our thoughts, on the contrary, were fast becoming cloddish. Our labour symbolized nothing, and left us mentally sluggish in the dusk of the evening. Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise. The yeoman and the scholar — the yeoman and the man of finest moral culture, though not the man of sturdiest sense and integrity — are two distinct individuals, and can never be melted or x welded into one substance.”

“I had already begun to suspect that Hollingsworth, like many other illustrious prophets, reformers, and philanthropists, was likely to make at least two proselytes among the women to one among the men.”

Shrewd Yankee observer! how comes it that he did not look oftener into the face of things with this wise smile, and so turn his marvellous lucidity of language to the great end of understanding life instead of making a spurious romance of Italy?

“The Marble Faun” is the most obviously factitious of Hawthorne’s books. Its defect is dual, in the selection of material with which he was not perfectly in sympathy and in unsureness of workmanship, uncertainty of tone — a very grave fault for Hawthorne whose writing is elsewhere so sound and well managed. In his other long romances, and his many exquisite short tales, Hawthorne’s supreme

excellence lies in his ability to suggest a mood or a colour and keep the reader wholly under the spell of it. "The Marble Faun" falters and breaks its own illusions. The country, the actual scenery where the story is laid, calls out to the tourist, Hawthorne, to describe it and make comments on its history and its differences from his "dear native land." As a human being he cannot avoid this, and so he polishes up his traveller's notes. Now, he is a very honest man and his traveller's notes are the expression of disillusion; the plain fact is, he does not like Italy, though he is finely eloquent in describing a beautiful thing here and there. On a basis of disillusioned romance and honest miscomprehension of the Italian people and the ruins of history, he erects a tragic plot which plays in and out among the studios of artists, whose work he does not understand either æsthetically or humanly. He is amazingly not at home in a scene which nevertheless has enough of the picturesque and the unfamiliar to excite him and suggest a story. A competent master of romance, he is puzzled by a "romantic" country and he inevitably wavers.

The "Conclusion" of "The Marble Faun" is a confession of impotence. The story does not arrive. The white innocence of Hilda against a dark crime might be a strong motive, but it is not. The reason is that the crime is not convincing; spooks and half-realized personages are the actors, and Hilda, "based, as it were, upon a cloud, and all surrounded with misty substance," is backed by substance of darker colour but quite as nebulous, and that again is confounded with a deeper background, which Hawthorne,



the tourist, dazedly looks upon and which the rest of us, readers of literature if not tourists in Italy, have in our imaginations as a solid reality. The Faun's transformation is no change in human character wrought by events, for he does not start his life in Hawthorne's book as a conceivable human man. We cannot be tragically moved by the sin or the dark glances of Miriam, because we do not take her to our hearts as a suffering woman; she is a ghost, not an inch thicker for her dark eyes and her deep mysteries of soul.

The most interesting thing about the book, to one who, while reading the story for itself, is at the same time interested to read Nathaniel Hawthorne, is that it reveals him as a virginal naïve imagination (for all his literary sophistication) shrinking from the obsolescence and decrepitude of Rome and more likable and childlike than Hilda herself. The Eternal City perplexed his simple poetic nature. For painting and sculpture and the monuments of antiquity he had no real taste. The personal shivers and aversions which creep into his story are quite the most human veracities in the book. The fact is that imaginatively he does not believe in his own story, so that in telling it he stammers charmingly.

Has the Faun pointed ears concealed under his locks? Is any reader of great fiction even mildly interested in the answer? The quasi-Italian palaces and towers melt away while you are looking at them, before they have fairly caught the eye. To bring the matter to a violent contrast of merit, a half dozen of Marion Crawford's anglicized stories of Italy are truer-seeming Italy and better stories than this

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work of the earlier American romancer. Except — and the exception is greater than the main proposition — except that Hawthorne's invariable distinction of mind, his luminous gift of style, his fine cadences redeem all his material and make even his flimsiest book an exquisite pleasure for those who love English words.

Hawthorne's earliest work and, within its compass, some of the best of his work is to be found in his short tales. "The Minister's Black Veil," "The Birthmark," "The Great Stone Face," "Ethan Brand," "Feathertop" are the sort of stories that tell no story, but create a condition of mind, produce a mood. Every reader can remember the sensation of one of these tales, but you will have difficulty in telling some one else what the tale is about. Hawthorne is a conjurer of moods, a prose-poet. He stands alone in the literature of New England, a verbal melodist without any ethical intention whatsoever, a delicate detached artist, as solitary in Concord as Poe was in New York; symbolizing, if he symbolizes anything, not the Puritan spirit, but the spirit of beauty everlastingly hostile or indifferent to the crabbed austerities and the soul-killing morbidity of Puritan ethics. Neither the philosophic library of Emerson nor the polyglot anthology of Longfellow announces so assuredly as the frail art of Hawthorne that civilization has dawned upon the Calvinistic barbarism of our colonial ancestors.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts, July 4, 1804. He died at Plymouth, New Hampshire,

May 19, 1864. The fact that his father and grandfather were sea captains is more important than that a remote ancestor was one of the judges in the Salem witchcraft trials. Hawthorne, if not Hawthorne's biographers, successfully outlived the judge. He graduated at Bowdoin College in 1825, a classmate of Longfellow. For some years after graduation he lived in seclusion trying his pen. In 1839 he was appointed to an obscure place in the Boston Custom House. He spent the year 1841-2 at Brook Farm. In 1842 he married Sophia Peabody and settled for a while at the Old Manse in Concord. From 1846 to 1849 he was surveyor at the Salem Custom House. Thereafter he lived at Lenox, West Newton and Concord. In 1853 he was appointed Consul at Liverpool by his college friend, Franklin Pierce. He held the post during Pierce's administration and then travelled in Europe for three years. He spent the rest of his life at Concord.

His works are: Fanshawe, 1828; Twice-Told Tales, 1837; Grandfather's Chair, 1841; Famous Old People, 1841; Liberty Tree, 1842; Biographical Stories for Children, 1842; Twice-Told Tales (with additions), 1842; Mosses from an Old Manse, 1846; The Scarlet Letter, 1850; True Stories, 1851; The House of the Seven Gables, 1851; A Wonder Book, 1851; The Snow Image, etc., 1851; The Blithedale Romance, 1852; Tanglewood Tales, 1853; The Marble Faun, 1860; Our Old Home, 1863; Passages from American Note-Books, 1868; Passages from English Note-Books, 1870; Passages from French and Italian Note-Books, 1871; Septimius Felton, 1871;

The Dolliver Romance, 1876; Doctor Grimshawe's Secret, 1883.

"Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife," by Julian Hawthorne contains all the essential biographical matter. A good literary biography is "A Study of Hawthorne" by G. P. Lathrop. The "Life" by Henry James, in *English Men of Letters*, is a very distinguished piece of work by one of the best critical minds of our time. The "Life" by G. E. Woodberry in *American Men of Letters* is excellent.

## CHAPTER VI

### LONGFELLOW

ON THE death of Longfellow, Whitman wrote a tribute to the other "good gray poet," which is so just and beautiful that it should be known to all who are interested in either Longfellow or Whitman.

"Longfellow in his voluminous works seems to me not only to be eminent in the style and forms of poetical expression that mark the present age (an idiosyncrasy, almost a sickness, of verbal melody), but to bring what is always dearest as poetry to the general human heart and taste, and probably must be so in the nature of things. He is certainly the sort of bard and counteractant most needed for our materialistic, self-assertive, money-worshipping Anglo-Saxon races, and especially for the present age in America — an age tyrannically regulated with reference to the manufacturer, the merchant, the financier, the politician and the day workman — for whom and among whom he comes as the poet of melody, courtesy, deference — poet of the mellow twilight of the past in Italy, Germany, Spain, and in northern Europe — poet of all sympathetic gentleness — and universal poet of women and young people. I should have to think long if I were asked to name the man who has done more, and in more valuable directions, for America.

"I doubt if there ever was such a fine intuitive judge and selector of poems. His translations of many German and Scandinavian pieces are said to be better than the vernaculars. He does not urge or lash. His influence is like good drink or air. He is not tepid either, but always vital, with flavour, motion, grace. He strikes a splendid average, and does not sing exceptional passions, or humanity's jagged escapades. He is not revolutionary, brings nothing offensive or new, does not deal hard blows. On the contrary, his songs soothe and heal, or if they excite, it is a healthy and agreeable excitement. His very anger is gentle, is at second hand (as in the 'Quadroon Girl' and the 'Witnesses').

"There is no undue element of pensiveness in Longfellow's strains. Even in the early translation, the Manrique, the movement is as of strong and steady wind or tide, holding up and buoying. Death is not avoided through his many themes, but there is something almost winning in his original verses and renderings on that dread subject — as, closing the 'Happiest Land' dispute

And then the landlord's daughter  
Up to heaven raised her hand,  
And said, 'Ye may no more contend,—  
There lies the happiest land!'

"To the ungracious complaint-charge of his want of racy nativity and special originality, I shall only say that America and the world may well be reverently thankful — can never be thankful enough — for any such singing-bird vouchsafed out of the centuries, without asking that the



notes be different from those of other songsters; adding what I have heard Longfellow himself say, that ere the New World can be worthily original, and announce herself and her own heroes, she must be well saturated with the originality of others, and respectfully consider the heroes that lived before Agamemnon."

Longfellow is the household poet of America; the laureateship was conferred on him by popular response, immediate, spontaneous and continuous. When that is said, whatever may be added is less significant. It is a noble fate to be for many years the poet most cherished by a million hearths. The multitudinous electorate may not crown the highest poetry, but whatever it does choose and long adhere to is indubitably important in human history.

Longfellow was the first American man of letters to establish for a busy and unlearned people a visible relation between academic culture and actual literary accomplishment. During eighteen of his most productive years, when he was well known to his countrymen as the poet of their simplest sentiments, he was a teacher of modern languages and literature at Harvard College. The poet who delighted the common heart with sweet song and pleasant ballad was Professor Longfellow. As a rule professors write books which are useful only to other professors and to students obedient to academic prescription. From Professor Longfellow's study a voice reached the popular ear. This man, official tutor in an institution monastically remote from the life of the toiling many, could say in wholly intelligible verse how a common man feels who has lost a child; he

that he  
complained.
 knew how to touch the despair of drudgery and raise it to confidence and a sense of personal dignity. He honoured in a plain unpatronizing way the village blacksmith, and in every American village the blacksmith is a useful citizen. He had a heart for ships and shipbuilders, and he gave new meaning to the Fourth-of-July orator's figure of the "ship of state" by symbolizing it in a real ship of hewn timbers. Long poems are hard to read, and solid pages of verse repel the unaccustomed reader, but Longfellow told the stories of Evangeline, Miles Standish and Hiawatha in verse almost as easy to read as prose.

The poet-professor, who was the emissary of academic culture to the untutored, was also the ambassador of creative literature to a museum of intellectual antiquities in which Greek roots were esteemed above the flowers of living song. This poet with fine manners, dignity and delicate taste, lover of music, responsive to the contemporary songs of the nations, bore a torch of living culture among rusty grammarians and the hebraical sons of a decadent but still stupid Puritanism. His successor, Lowell, and his friend, Norton, carried the torch on, and then it went out; there came the time when the teaching of modern literature in American universities, at Harvard certainly, was divided between philologists on the one hand, men with no literary sense, who reduce Shakespeare and Milton to archæological specimens, and, on the other hand, amiable dilettanti who illustrate the truth of Tanner's epigram: "He who can does; he who cannot teaches." Longfellow and Lowell were beneficent blunderers into that realm of degreed and

gowned authority where the counting of final E's in Chaucer is supposed to be the study of poetry and the writing of a dull introduction to a superfluously new edition of Hamlet entitles a commonplace doctor of philosophy to a professorship.

Longfellow brought humane civilization to an American university and sent academic culture to the people in his great classes beyond the college gates. To both he was the bearer of the light of contemporaneous Europe. He not only told his pupils about Dante's tomb, but read them snatches of folk-song and popular legend. He translated modern poetry for his classes, and through his books gave America a living sense of the beauty of the Old World. A younger Harvard professor thinks that the foundations of Longfellow's fame rest almost wholly on his service in discovering to an inexperienced nation the splendours of European civilization. It was a genuine service, but it was not all nor was it the most important. His fame rests on his ability to phrase memorably ideas native to all simple minds everywhere. It is to be noted that his most cherished poems, from "A Psalm of Life" to the long narratives, "Evangeline" and "The Courtship of Miles Standish," are on American subjects or on experiences common to humanity. In "Tales of a Wayside Inn," in which are twenty-two stories, the best known is "Paul Revere." Nevertheless it is true that at the right moment Longfellow made America acquainted with some of the gayer beauties and the more innocent music of the old nations.

If one willing to ignore traditional evaluations, to dis-

regard popular judgment and services that are an undeniable matter of national history, opens Longfellow for the book-in-itself, one finds him a third-rate poet. "Third-rate" is not meant quite in its contemptuous sense. The first-rate poets are Milton, Shakespeare, and Shelley whose poetry is sustained through large schemes. Less than that supreme poetry is the perfection of short poems and short passages in long poems, the perfection of Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Whitman, Browning. Below that perfection Longfellow almost always falls. His best work is not unlike Gray's in its calm transparency, its pleasant meditation on religious and sentimental commonplace. His longer narratives are readable,\* indeed they find many readers year after year, and that alone is enough to distinguish him in a period whose poetic achievement is little more than an anthology of lyrics and fragments. But in the longer poems of the age, "The Prelude" of Wordsworth, and Browning's "The Ring and the Book," are superb lines — fragments of gold. There are few great lines in Longfellow; in "Christus" the miraculous does not happen even for a moment, except in the lines which are sentences from the English Bible turned almost word for word into metre. His verse is evenly and permanently of secondary quality. The difference between the great and the good Longfellow well knew, for he was an admirable judge; in his journal he records the opinion that

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\*A good way to read "Evangeline" is to forget that it is in metre, to read it like prose, as many readers probably do. To me, at least, the hexameters, listened for as hexameters, are annoying. English simply will not run long and continuously in this measure. Longfellow, a technical master, made more consistently good hexameters than any one else except Arthur Hugh Clough. But he failed on the whole.

Ariosto's "Orlando Furioso" is "verse rather than poetry after all."

To remind ourselves how the first-rate excels what is less than first-rate, a few examples will serve. Longfellow says in "The Poet's Tale":

And rivulets, rejoicing, rush and leap  
And wave their fluttering signals from the steep.

Wordsworth's line is:

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep.

Somewhere in the ear is a mentor which advises that Longfellow's lines are verse and Wordsworth's is poetry.

The end of "The Psalm of Life" is:

Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labour and to wait.

Multitudes have been consoled by those lines. On the field of Sebastopol a dying British soldier repeated them. Yet they are not comparable with the line so near like them, so far above them:

They also serve who only stand and wait.

In a sonnet "On Mrs. Kemble's Readings from Shakespeare" Longfellow sings:

O happy reader! having for thy text  
The magic book whose sibylline leaves have caught  
The rarest essence of all human thought.

The lines are good, but they fail beside Wordsworth's

Poor earthly casket of immortal verse.

It is not simply that Longfellow's ideas are commonplace. Both Wordsworth and Tennyson are commonplace and lacking in passion, but now and again some verbal wizardry works a celestial redemption of their intellectual banality.

The finest things in Longfellow are not those best known. The dear public, to whom any critic with a humane sense of the uses of literature must at times humbly bow, has honoured its poet splendidly — and missed his loftiest moments. "A Psalm of Life" would not disgrace a poet's juvenile volume, if it were allowed to sleep there. For some reason it does not sleep, but stirs the sentiments of the very people who may be assumed to know the Psalms of David, and knowing them can yet take seriously "A Psalm of Life," "Rock of Ages," and other bad hymns! Genuine religious feeling makes the heart hospitable to very poor religious poetry. One would like to erase "A Psalm of Life" from every page whereon it is printed, and from every heart wherein it is remembered, and put in its place Longfellow's glorious sonnet to Milton, a sonnet which is peer of the great sonnets of Milton himself and of Wordsworth.

I pace the sounding sea-beach and behold  
 How the voluminous billows roll and run,  
 Upheaving and subsiding, while the sun  
 Shines through their sheeted emerald far unrolled,  
 And the ninth wave, slow gathering fold by fold  
 All its loose-flowing garments into one,  
 Plunges upon the shore, and floods the dun  
 Pale reach of sands, and changes them to gold.  
 So in majestic cadence rise and fall



The mighty undulations of thy song,  
O sightless bard, England's Mæonides!  
And ever and anon, high over all  
Uplifted, a ninth wave superb and strong,  
Floods all the soul with its melodious seas.

The six sonnets that accompany Longfellow's translation of Dante are all perfect; the first, especially, remarkable for the essential unity of its fine thought, the central metaphor, the restrained sonorous phrasing, is so flawless in mould and noble in content that it stands undiminished at the entrance to Dante.

Oft have I seen at some cathedral door  
A labourer, pausing in the dust and heat,  
Lay down his burden, and with reverent feet  
Enter, and cross himself, and on the floor  
Kneel to repeat his paternoster o'er;  
Far off the noises of the world retreat;  
The loud vociferations of the street  
Become an undistinguishable roar.  
So, as I enter here from day to day,  
And leave my burden at this minster gate,  
Kneeling in prayer, and not ashamed to pray,  
The tumult of the time disconsolate  
To inarticulate murmurs dies away,  
While the eternal ages watch and wait.

That many people would not be interested in poems to poets is a conceivable reason why these masterpieces of Longfellow are less generally admired than some of his verses feeble in sentiment and unelevated by verbal inspiration. There is, however, one sonnet of his, unsurpassably

lovely and poignant with a sorrow universally understood, which should have first place in the mind of every sort of reader who would care for Longfellow or any poetry. This is "The Cross of Snow."

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,  
 A gentle face — the face of one long dead —  
 Looks at me from the wall, where round its head  
 The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.  
 Here in this room she died; and soul more white  
 Never through martyrdom of fire was led  
 To its repose; nor can in books be read  
 The legend of a life more benedight.  
 There is a mountain in the distant West  
 That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines  
 Displays a cross of snow upon its side.  
 Such is the cross I wear upon my breast  
 These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes  
 And seasons, changless since the day she died.

It is characteristic of Longfellow that this poem on the dreadful death of his wife should not have been published while he lived. He did not utter his more intimate passions, and this sonnet indicates that he would not rather than that he could not. His restraint is humanly admirable, but his poetry suffers because it is not charged with the heat of his soul. He is usually objective, bright and clear as prose.

He seldom excites subtle sorrows or strange moods, never lights fiery passions nor disturbs the inner sources of tears for all things that are. One exceptional poem which makes its effect in a Coleridgean way, without the reader's knowing just what there is in the thought or the melody that moves

him, is "In the Churchyard at Cambridge," especially the first stanza.

In the village churchyard she lies,  
Dust is in her beautiful eyes,  
No more she breathes, nor feels, nor stirs;  
At her feet and at her head  
Lies a slave to attend the dead,  
But their dust is white as hers.

Another poem which would make the fortune of a book of "moods" by some young modern, who perhaps might be contemptuous of old Longfellow, is this:

The tide rises, the tide falls,  
The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;  
Along the sea-sands damp and brown  
The traveller hastens toward the town,  
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

Darkness settles on roofs and walls,  
But the sea, the sea in the darkness calls;  
The little waves, with their soft, white hands,  
Efface the footprints on the sands,  
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls  
Stamp and neigh, as the hostler calls;  
The day returns, but nevermore  
Returns the traveller to the shore.  
And the tide rises, the tide falls.

Of Longfellow's technical gifts there is no doubt. Either because he had not a very deep nature or because his early

success showed him what his audience needed, he applied his fine skill to thoughts and feelings usually not striking nor powerful, and so he became a very highly refined poet of the many. For the multitude who do not read the best poetry there is left little except the work of versifiers of limited skill, of inferior literary culture, the Hemanses, Havergals, Haines Baileys and hymn writers. Longfellow devoted an accomplished artistry to a humble grade of poetry, as though a competent architect should design workmen's cottages or a true musician should prepare an evangelical hymnal.

He appeals everywhere to minds which English writers call "middle-class" and French writers call "bourgeois." It is hard to find a word that has the right connotation in America. "Common people" does not define them, and "democrat" is too valuable and excellent a word for them. Perhaps "intellectually immature" is just, but the phrase sounds snobbish and patronizing. The boys of Harrow — or was it Eton? — voted him the finest of poets. The most catholic of translators, he was translated in turn into twenty languages. He is admired by people who have the gravest troubles and the fewest troublesome ideas, who are not interested in the intensest expression of the tragedies, stresses and ecstasies of life, but who take elementary ideals deeply to heart and seek plain elementary answers to daily perplexities, who like a touch of strangeness in their poetry but do not understand it if the language is too strange.

In his journal Longfellow says of a poem he is meditating, "I must put live beating heart into it." His poetry seems

passionless, without "live beating heart," as compared with the great voices of song, but three generations of simple hearts have found Longfellow a vital force in their lives.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine, February 27, 1807. He died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, March 24, 1882. He was educated at Portland Academy and Bowdoin College. On his graduation from Bowdoin, in 1825, he was appointed teacher of modern languages, and to prepare himself he spent four years in Europe. In 1834 he was appointed to succeed George Ticknor as Smith Professor of Modern Languages in Harvard University. He spent another year in Europe, and in 1837 settled in Cambridge for the rest of his life. He held the chair at Harvard from 1836 to 1854, when he resigned. He went abroad in 1842 and again in 1868. He married Mary Story Potter in 1831. She died in 1835. In 1843 he married Francis Elizabeth Appleton. In 1861 she died of injuries received by fire.

His principal works are: *Copeas de Manrique* (translation), 1833; *Outre-Mer* (prose), 1833-34; *Hyperion* (prose), 1839; *Voices of the Night*, 1839; *Ballads and Other Poems*, 1841; *Poems on Slavery*, 1842; *The Spanish Student*, 1843; *Poems*, 1845; *The Poet and Poetry of Europe* (compilation), 1845; *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems*, 1846; *Evangeline*, 1847; *Kavanagh* (prose), 1849; *The Seaside and the Fireside*, 1850; *The Golden Legend*, 1851; *Hiawatha*, 1855; *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, 1858; *Tales of a*

Wayside Inn, 1863; Flower-de-Luce, 1866; Dante's Divina Commedia (translation), 1867; The New England Tragedies, 1868; The Divine Tragedy, 1871 (published the following year with the New England Tragedies as Christus: A Mystery); Three Books of Song, 1872; Aftermath, 1873; The Masque of Pandora, 1875; Kéramos, 1878; Ultima Thule, 1880; In the Harbour, 1882; Michael Angelo, 1883.

Longfellow's journals are found in the "Life" by Samuel Longfellow, in three volumes. The biography by Thomas Wentworth Higginson in *American Men of Letters* is pleasant. In W. E. Henley's "Views and Reviews" is a fine appreciation.



## CHAPTER VII

### WHITTIER

WHITTIER's good sense and modest dignity are nowhere better expressed than in the verses introductory to his collected work.

I love the old melodious lays  
Which softly melt the ages through,  
The songs of Spenser's golden days,  
Arcadian Sidney's silvery phrase,  
Sprinkling our noon of time with freshest morning dew.

Yet, vainly in my quiet hours  
To breathe their marvellous notes I try;  
I feel them, as the leaves and flowers  
In silence feel the dewy showers,  
And drink with glad, still lips the blessing of the sky.

The rigour of a frozen clime,  
The harshness of an untaught ear,  
The jarring words of one whose rhyme  
Beat often Labour's hurried time,  
Or Duty's rugged march through storm and strife, are here.

Of mystic beauty, dreamy grace,  
The rounded art no lack supplies;  
Unskilled the subtle lines to trace,  
Or softer shades of Nature's face,  
I view her common forms with unanointed eyes.

Nor mine the seer-like power to show  
 The secrets of the heart and mind;  
 To drop the plummet-line below  
 Our common world of joy and woe,  
 A more intense despair or brighter hope to find.

Yet here at least an earnest sense  
 Of human right and weal is shown;  
 A hate of tyranny intense,  
 And hearty in its vehemence,  
 As if my brother's pain and sorrow were my own.

O Freedom! if to me belong  
 Nor mighty Milton's gift divine,  
 Nor Marvell's wit and graceful song,  
 Still with a love as deep and strong  
 As theirs, I lay, like them, my best gifts on thy shrine!

The New England Quaker, confessing that he could not achieve poetry, has in the act of confession made a beautiful poem, sound in stanzaic structure, and not unmelodious. Whittier compels admiration in spite of the undeniable crudities of his lyre, crudities that he so charmingly acknowledged. Spontaneity, sincerity, passion, these are his high gifts; they triumph over all his verbal difficulties. They lift him not among the great poets, whose company he humbly knew he could not join, but among the genuine poets, who have said their heart in English words, who are true to the earth though they do not rise upon the earth-spurning wings of absolute song. Whittier's earliest inspiration was the anti-slavery fervour, and of this passion, the tensest, most noble, that swept over New England and roused

its dull muse to ecstasy, Whittier was the authentic laureate.

It is impossible for a New Englander (even one who fancies himself a thoroughly emancipated modern) to detach Whittier's ruggedly heroic verses from the harsh soil of history, to see them except through the noon air of his pacific and serene personality. To hear his verses, as it were from his own lips, gives them double dramatic force. His shy Quaker voice is hoarse with rage, the lips of innocence are white with scorn. The casual reader of "Ichabod" might be unimpressed, for the verses are plain, ordinary, lighted by no flash of self-explanatory beauty. But when the poem is understood as the divine indignation of a benevolent Quaker at Webster's surrender to the slave power, it becomes incandescent, and one imagines that Webster, cynical politician who bent his shaggy brows histrionically upon his opponents, must have shrivelled beneath those lyric curses of naïve righteousness. It is the devastating wrath of a peaceful man! Whether Whittier's blasting scorn affected Webster, who was a shrewdly dishonest actor upon a primitive stage of oratory, the poem and the poet's subsequent magnanimity are still profoundly impressive sixty years after the conflict. Poems on current events are as a rule ephemeral; emotion that is strong enough to make such poems permanent is a mighty fact in literature. In Whittier's occasional verses the vehicle of the emotion seems to have been heated by its very resistance to the idea. He is so intense in his meaning that his technically defective verses are not quite bad, certainly never ludicrous. Sometimes his fiery challenge dashes against the stubborn

hardness of his words like the dissonance of swift water over rocks. For example the lines from "Toussaint L'Ouverture":

To hear above his scar-worn back  
The heavy slave-whip's frequent crack.

"Frequent" is a feebly mischosen word. But the two lines and the verses in which they are set are powerful. "The Slave Ships" is naïvely terrible. One stanza has the naked simplicity of genius:

Red glowed the western waters —  
The setting sun was there,  
Scattering alike on wave and cloud  
His fiery mesh of hair.  
Amidst a group of blindness  
A solitary eye  
Gazed from the burdened slaver's deck  
Into that burning sky.

To make sure that the plain power of that and other stanzas is genuine poetic art, that we are not misled by the tragedy of the subject into ascribing to the verses more effect than is inwardly theirs, we have only to read the mild melodramatic poems which Longfellow dutifully contributed to the cause, verses unspontaneous, uninspired. The reader's patriotic sympathies cannot fill utterly bad verses with the breath of life. The noblest enthusiasm cannot flame in wholly unpoetic verse. All the earnest belief in the world will not forge poetry. The abundance of dead unremembered verses by others on the same themes that Whittier rushed into rough

rhythms is proof of his individual genius. It may be that our knowledge of his seraphic gentleness throws into relief the Hebraic violence of his prophecies; it may be that the facts of biography lend adventitious merit to his poetry; but even so, the failure of other equally sincere enthusiasts, and his almost unfailing success in striking out some white hot lines in poem after poem on the same subject, acclaim his genius when all temporal and historic prejudices are deducted.

The difference between a good hymn and a bad hymn lies not in a difference of religious sincerity, and the reader's accessible emotions will be the same in both cases; the difference is in the psalmists' poetic powers. Even when denuded of their attendant circumstances and read by somebody not familiar with our national struggle, the following verses must surely stand out strong, like a speech of Lincoln's:

Hoarse, horrible and strong,  
Rises to Heaven that agonizing cry,  
Filling the arches of the hollow sky.  
HOW LONG, O GOD, HOW LONG?

And these verses written "apropos of the adoption of Pinckney's resolutions" (prosaic words that send one to a handbook of history), hear how they ring! —

Shall our New England stand erect no longer,  
But stoop in chains upon her downward way,  
Thicker to gather on her limbs and stronger  
Day after day?

Oh, no; me thinks from all her wild green mountains —  
 From valleys where her slumbering fathers lie —  
 From her blue rivers and her welling fountains,  
     And clear cold sky —

From her rough coast, and isles, which hungry Ocean  
 Gnaws with his surges — from the fisher's skiff,  
 With white sail swaying to the billow's motion  
     Round rock and cliff —

From the free fireside of her unbought farmer —  
 From her free labourer at his loom and wheel —  
 From the brown smith-shop, where, beneath the hammer,  
     Rings the red steel —

From each and all, if God hath not forsake▲  
 Our land and left us to an evil choice,  
 Loud as a summer thunderbolt shall waken  
     A people's voice.

Most of the singers of liberty in America have been beneath their task. Their eagle has been a "property" eagle (the sordid pun happens to be tragically true), and their flag has been a painted cloth, a crude bunting which Congressmen are wont to spatter with words. Whitman and Whittier, each in his own sincere tones, have spoken with the authentic voice of liberty and spoken many times during long lives. Lowell's muse uttered liberty once or twice, but his democracy was literary and not instinctive. Emerson, who held a lyre crude as Whittier's in a highly cultivated hand, sang twice or thrice in ringing tones of rebellion. Whittier, shy and gentle, nurtured in a childlike faith and untrained, unperplexed by culture, sends the tones of his trumpet across



the world, to England, the arch-hypocrite mouthing liberty and defending slavery, and to the Pope, vicar of the prince of peace entangled in cowardly and murderous politics. While American statesmen, North and South, play their cunningly stupid games, and the agitators hurl indignant rhetoric, and the respectable proslavery Bostonians mob the orators, Whittier, cradled in an unwarlike creed, blazes forth in bellicose rebuke, strikes again and again at the smooth brow of evil with verses virile and aflame. His single purpose overwhelms the obstacles of his verbal hesitations. There is no mistaking him, even when the ear protests against his unintentional dissonances. Whether his work is poetry or rhymed propaganda, it is literature, for it expresses a man and events in words that are to-day alive with emotion. One who by temperament and by the habit of other reading feels himself out of sympathy with Whittier's hoarse verses has but to open his mind and present fresh surfaces to the impact of Whittier's intensity in order to be smitten by it.

Whittier's religious verse is a mixture of banality and exaltation. At its worst it is but the grotesque psalter with which Protestant Christianity from Doctor Watts to Doctor Moody has offended the sensitive ear. At its best it is the passion of worship which transcends particular belief or doubt and imparts immediately the religion of the singer. "Laus Deo" is a moving song of adoration; its triumphant ecstasy is instantly contagious. His less inspired hymns are sweet and manly, in spite of their childishness, and now and again their childishness becomes rather a childlike simplicity which is near to poetry.

II.

Of Whittier's narratives and ballads, some, like "The Witch's Daughter," are of good substance but unpoetic in expression. Others, like "Maud Müller," are simply bad, as Whittier, with his mischievous modesty, was the first to admit. "Cassandra Southwick" is a good ballad; it has swing and rush and a lively pictorial effect. "Skipper Ireson's Ride" is excellent; it has the haunting ring of true balladry; it repeats itself over and over in the reader's ears; and whatever is of unforgettable rhythm, of a rhythm that carries and continually reminds one of the content, is true poetry. Chant this over once and it will stay in the memory:

Old Floyd Ireson, for his hard heart,  
Tarred and feathered and carried in a cart  
By the women of Marblehead.

The best of poets is he who dreams something that the rest of mankind would never, never think of and makes it real — Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley. A lesser type of poet, but a genuine poet, is he who celebrates the actual land on which he lives, the daily scenes familiar to many eyes, the people among whom he moves. Whittier is the unrivalled portrayer of the New England landscape. Burden him with every disability that criticism can impute to a poet; unfrock him from the priesthood of perfect singers; reduce him to the plain common ground of minor poets, where he placed himself, the simplest, most undeluded common citizen in the democracy of letters; remember every *gaucherie* of which he is innocently guilty: he still keeps "on Yankee hills immortal sheep."

His masterpiece is "Snow-Bound." The placid fidelity of the poem, the justice of the details, the apparently unsought felicity of the words identify it inevitably and forever with the experience of every one who has lived in New England.

This page happens to be shaping itself in a New England farmhouse in January. The open wood fire is still burning, ably reinforced by steam coils. The wires are strung along the road for electric lights which will star the wintry darkness next year. The cosmopolitanism which has unified the world has reached to this corner of New England and softened the asperities of the ancestral character. The walls of a room near by, once filled with nasal hymns, give their mural ears to the strange magic of Debussy and Strauss. The intellectual atmosphere has changed, the people are different in many ways, some good, some bad; electric cars go by the door, and an abominable new house of green and brown shingles is an unlovely neighbour to this white house designed and built long ago by the village carpenters. Many aspects of the world out the window are unlike anything that Whittier saw. And yet "Snow-Bound" is true; it describes yonder landscape. The poem stands through all changes permanent as one of the granite boulders sheeted in snow. The fingers of life moulded the words. Through the plain verses actuality said itself, and actuality is immortal. If one who had been brought up in a New England village should be stricken blind, "Snow-Bound" would give him eyes again for all that Whit-

tier describes. The rustic muse of the poem is like the mother at the hearth ——

Recalling in her fitting phrase,  
So rich and picturesque and free,  
(The common unrhymed poetry  
Of simple life and country ways),  
The story of her early days.

The sketches of character are good portraits, not too highly praised when they are compared to Chaucer's Prologue; the faces are alive and ruddy in the firelight, homely-beautiful like "Flemish pictures" (Whittier's own just analogy) — the father, a "prompt, decisive man," the uncle "innocent of books," and the aunt — was ever more charming tribute to the elderly maiden?

The morning dew, that dried so soon  
With others, glistened at her noon;  
Through years of toil and soil and care,  
From glossy tress to thin gray hair,  
All unprofaned she held apart  
The virgin fancies of the heart.

Then the sister

Keeping with many a light disguise  
The secret of self-sacrifice.

And the strongest portrait of all (strange that Whittier of all men could draw it so richly!), is that of the cultivated passionate woman:

A certain pardlike, treacherous grace  
Swayed the lithe limbs and dropped the lash,

Lent the white teeth the dazzling flash,  
And under low brows, black with night,  
Rayed out at times a dangerous light;

. . . . .

A woman tropical, intense.

Whittier's art is restricted. He never achieved the final majesties of the grand style. But within his limits he is genuinely good. His verse lacks some of the virtues, and by compensation it is free from some of the vices, of his university-bred contemporaries, who wrote so often with the pens of the ages that they did not learn firmly to grasp their own. Whittier's poems are indigenous to the soil as lilacs and elm trees, and they are also the voice of a very great man. Through a medium which he did not fully master, he did manage to convey with power and vividness his fiery convictions, blazes of passion across the blue serenity of his faith. With the sureness that plain simple vision gives to an imperfect draughtsman, he made pictures of his landscape that are unsurpassed, if not unsurpassable. If the day comes when they are no longer enjoyed, on that day the last Yankee will have died.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

John Greenleaf Whittier was born at Haverhill, Massachusetts, December 17, 1807. He died at Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, September 7, 1892. His schooling was imperfect and his Quaker-Puritan father did not approve his addiction to verse. He read some poetry, notably Burns, and his sister secretly sent his early rhymes to the Newbury-

port *Free Press*, edited by William Lloyd Garrison. This opened his career as poet and journalist. He became editor of *The Haverhill Gazette* and *The New England Magazine*. His newspaper work brought him into practical relations with politics, and he might have gone to Congress; but he refused. He was a capable, sane worker for the cause of Abolition, was attacked by respectable mobs and met them bravely. He went to the Massachusetts Legislature in 1835. In 1837 he went to Philadelphia to work on *The Pennsylvania Freeman*. Thereafter he lived at Amesbury and Danvers, Massachusetts. He did not marry.

His works are: *Legends of New England*, 1831; *Moll Pitcher*, 1832; *Justice and Expediency*, 1833; *Mogg Megone*, 1836; *Poems*, 1837; *Ballads, Anti-Slavery Poems, etc.*, 1838; *Lays of My Home*, 1843; *The Stranger in Lowell*, 1845; *Supernaturalism in New England*, 1847; *Voices of Freedom*, 1849; *Old Portraits and Modern Sketches*, 1850; *Songs of Labour*, 1850; *The Chapel of the Hermits*, 1853; *Literary Recreations and Miscellanies*, 1854; *The Panorama*, 1856; *Home Ballads*, 1860; *In War Time*, 1863; *National Lyrics*, 1865; *Snow-Bound*, 1866; *The Tent on the Beach*, 1867; *Among the Hills*, 1868; *Miriam*, 1870; *The Pennsylvania Pilgrim*, 1872; *Hazel Blossoms*, 1874; *Centennial Hymn*, 1876; *The Vision of Echard*, 1878; *The King's Missive*, 1881; *The Bay of Seven Islands*, 1883; *Saint Gregory's Guest*, 1886; *At Sundown*, 1892.

The standard life of Whittier is by Samuel T. Pickard in two volumes.



## CHAPTER VIII

### POE

NO MAN more truly than Poe illustrates our conception of a poet as one who treads the cluttered ways of circumstance with his head in the clouds. Many another impoverished dreamer has dwelt in his thoughts, apart from the world's events. And of nearly all artists it is true that their lives are written in their works, and that the rest of the story concerns another almost negligible personality. In the case of Poe the separation between spiritual affairs and temporal is unusually wide. His fragile verse is pitched above any landscape of fact; his tales contain only misty reflections of common experience; and the legendary personage which he has become is a creature inspired in other imaginations by his books, not a faithful portrait of the human being who lived in America between 1809 and 1849. The contrast between his aspirations and his earthly conditions, between the figure of romance he would fain have been and the man in authentic records stripped of myth and controversy, is pitiful, almost violent.

This poet, with a taste for palaces and Edens, lived in sprawling cities that had not yet attempted magnificence. This bookish man, whom one envisages poring over quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore, owned no wonderful

library, not even such a "working" collection as a literary man is supposed to require, but feasted on the miscellaneous riches that fell now and then upon the arid desk of the hack reviewer. This inventor of grotesque plots had no extraordinary adventures, none certainly that make thrilling anecdote. Capable of Chesterfieldian grace of style, and adept in the old-fashioned Southern flourish of manner, he left few "polite" letters, and those few are undistinguished. To follow Poe's course by the guide of literary landmarks is to undertake a desolate journey.

As his artistic self is apart from things, so it is apart from men. In his criticisms, it is true, he is found in open and somewhat controversial relations with the writers of his time and vicinity. As editor, he had dealings with the world of authors and journalists. But his acquaintance among the "literati" includes no man of letters who is now well remembered, and implies no possibility of flashing exchange between his imagination and another as brilliant. He never met his intellectual equal in the flesh, except Lowell, whom he saw only once. Irving in Sunnyside was not nearer than Irving in Spain. Not a friend was qualified to counsel or encourage Poe in his work, not a neighbour in art was competent to inspire him. He was the flower of no group of writers, but stands alone, original, aloof.

The isolation of Poe from the best minds of his day is not well understood by those who have not a correct geographical conception of America in 1840. One of the most authoritative English reviews expressed surprise that a recent book on Boston omitted from the chapter devoted to *littérateurs* the

name of Poe, who was born in Boston and was the finest of American poets. The intellectual life of the only Greater Boston that has produced literature was as remote from Poe as was Victorian London, and he was the only important critic in America who understood the relative magnitudes of those two centres of light. His caustic opinions about the Bostonians, which seem more discerning to us than they did to our New England fathers, are witness to his detachment from the only considerable movement in American literature of those dim "provincial" times.

Whatever influence contemporaneous thought exerted on Poe came from books and not from men, not from experience with the world. Though a few reflections of his contacts with life, such as the English school in "William Wilson," are to be made out in his stories, and though in some of his essays a momentary admiration or hostility of a personal nature slipped a magnifying lens beneath his critical eye, yet the finger of circumstance is seldom on his pages, the echoes of human encounter are not heard in his art.

The nature of Poe's dis severance from life is one of the strangest in the annals of unworldly men of books. He was not among those who, like Lamb, transfigure petty and dull experience, or those who combat suffering with blithe philosophies like Stevenson; he was not a wilful hermit; nor was he among those invalids who, in constrained seclusion, have leisure for artistry and contemplation. He was a practical editor in busy offices. He no doubt thought of himself, Mr. Poe, as urbane and cosmopolitan. He had knocked about the world a little. For a while he was in the army. He was

effective and at ease upon the lecture platform. He meditated rash adventures in foreign lands until he apparently came to believe that he had really met with them. At his best, he was reserved and well bred, aware of his intellectual superiority. Sometimes, perhaps when he was most cast down and hard driven, he met the world with a jaunty man-of-the-world swagger. After he left the Allans, he was on the outskirts of social groups, high or low. His love for elegant society unfitted him for vagabondage. His lack of worldly success, if no other limitation, forbade his entering for more than a visit the circles of comfort and good breeding. But no matter what his mood or what his circumstance, it did not affect the quality of his work or the nature of his subjects. When he wrote he dropped the rest of himself.

And, with respect to him, artistic biography may well follow his example, and documentary biography may confess its futility. No biographer thus far, not even Mr. Woodberry, has succeeded in making very interesting the narrative portions of Poe's career. It is a bare chronicle of neutral circumstance, from which rises, the more wonderful, an achievement of highly coloured romance, poetry of perfect, unaccountable originality, and criticism the most penetrating that any American writer has given us.

Perhaps it is his criticism, with its air of maturity and well-pondered knowledge of all the literatures of the Orient and the Occident, which makes it seem the more singular that he owed nothing to universities and scholarly circles. The Allans took him to England when he was six years old and put him in a school where he learned, it is fair to suppose, the

rudiments of the classics and French. He went one term to the University of Virginia, and a few months to West Point. Though the one institution was founded by Thomas Jefferson and the other by the United States Government, it is no very cynical irreverence to withhold from them gratitude on Poe's behalf. The most significant record of his life at "the University" is that which shows him browsing idly in the library. His most profitable occupation at West Point was writing lampoons of the instructors and preparing the volume of verses for which he collected subscriptions from his fellow cadets. He was not at either institution long enough to receive whatever of culture and instruction it had to offer. He was self-taught. He read poetry when he was young, and began forthwith to write it. As a military cadet he had precocious and arrogant critical opinions. At twenty-four he appears with a neat manuscript roll of short stories under his arm, which cause the judges of a humdrum magazine contest to start awake.

From this time to the end he was a hard-working journalist and professional story-teller. He pursued his work through carking, persistent poverty, amid the distractions of inner restlessness and outward maladjustments. His poverty was not merited punishment for indolence or extravagance. He was industrious, and deserved a better wage than he received. He was not an obscure, unrecognized genius, waiting for posterity to discover him, but he "arrived" early and was popular in his own day. His books, however, had no great sale, for his pieces appeared in the magazines, some of them more than once, and the demand for his work was

thus satisfied, to the profit of the magazine publishers rather than to the profit of the author.

He lived laborious days and he lived in frugal style. He spent little money on himself, but handed his earnings to his mother-in-law. Whatever else was sinful in the sprees which have been over-elaborated in the chronicles, their initial cost was not great. When he went into debt, the lust he hoped to gratify was the insane desire to found a good magazine. His wildest dissipation was the performance of mental jugglery for the applause that he craved.

He spent weeks making good his challenge to the world to send him a cryptogram that he could not decipher. When he reviewed a book, he *reviewed* it, he examined it to the last rhetorical minutia. Griswold's opinion that "he was more remarkable as a dissector of sentences than as a commenter upon ideas," is a mean way of saying that he was a patient, sharp scrutinizer of workmanship. Mrs. Browning put it more generously when she said that Poe had so evidently *read* her poems as to be a wonder among critics.

Poe had a mania for curious and unusual information. His knowledge was so incomplete and inaccurate that several critics in sixty years have discovered, with the aid of specialists, that he lacked the thoroughness which is now habitual with all who undertake to write books. But Poe's knowledge, such as it was, implies much reading. And much reading and much writing are impossible to an idle, dissipated man.

This clear-headed, fine-handed artist is present and accounted for at the author's desk. His hours off duty, abundantly and confusedly recorded, do not furnish essential



matter for large books. If one without forewarning begins to read any life of Poe, one feels that a mystery is about to open. There seem to be clues to suppressed matters, suspicious lacunæ. The lives are written, like some novels, with hintful rows of stars. A shadowy path promises to lead to a misty mid-region of Weir. But Weir proves to be a place that Poe invented. He himself was the first foolish biographer of Poe. The "real" Poe (to take an invidious adjective from the titles of a modern kind of biography) is a simple, intelligible, and if one may dare to say it, a rather insignificant man. To make a hero or a villain of him is to write fiction.

The craving for story has been at work demanding and producing such fiction. The raw materials were made in America and shipped to France for psychological manufacture. The resulting figure is an irresponsible genius scribbling immortality under vinous inspiration, or turning neuropsychopathic rhymes. Before paranoia was discovered as a source of genius, wine received all the credit. But Poe could not write a line except when his head was clear and he was at the antipodes of hilarity. The warmth of Bohemia, boulevard mirth, however stimulating to the other mad bards of New York and Philadelphia, never fetched a song from him. He was a solemn, unconvinial, humourless man, who took no joy in his cups. If on occasion he found companions in riot, they were not café poets. Once, when the bottle was passing, and there were other poets present, he so far forgot himself as to say that he had written one poem that would live ("The Raven"), but this expression of pride

does not seem unduly bacchanalian. One could wish that the delights of stein-on-the-table friendship had been his. He needed friends and the happier sort of relaxation. But what record is there of the New York wits and journalists visiting Fordham of an evening to indulge in book-talk and amicable liquor? The chaste dinners of the Saturday Club in Boston were ruddy festivals of mutual admiration compared with anything that Poe knew.

The unromantic fact is that alcohol made Poe sick and he got no consolation from it. But before this fact was widely understood, long before there was talk of neuropsychology and hydrocephalus, when even starvation was not clearly reckoned with, it was known in America that Poe drank. This fact became involved with a tradition which has descended in direct line from Elizabethan puritanism to nineteenth-century America. According to this tradition, poets who do nothing but write poetry are frivolous persons inclined to frequent taverns. The New England poets, to be sure, were not revellers, but they were *moral teachers* as well as poets, and that redeemed them. The American, knowing them, saw Poe in contrast, as the Englishwoman in the theatre contrasted the ruin of Cleopatra with "the 'ome life of our own dear Queen." And Poe, always unfortunate, offers a confirmatory half fact by beginning to die in a gutter in Baltimore — a fact about which Holmes, the physician, can make a not unkindly joke! Besides, what can be expected of a poet who is said to have influenced French poets? We know what the French poets are, because they also wrote novels — or somebody with about the same name wrote them.

Alas for Poe that, in addition to his other offences against respectability, he should have got a French reputation and become, not only a son of Marlowe, but a son of Villon and brother of Verlaine.\*

And Poe, meanwhile, with these brilliant but somewhat defamatory reputations, lived, worked, and died in such intellectual solitude that Griswold could write immediately after his death that he left few friends. It is the unhappy truth. Those who promptly denied it, Graham and Willis, showed commendable good nature, but they were both incapable of being Poe's friends in any warm sense. Whether they were at fault or Poe was at fault, the fact is that Poe distrusted the one and was contemptuous of the other.

What writer besides Poe, what writer whose life is copiously recorded and who lived to have his work known in three nations, has left no chronicles of notable friendships? Think how the writers of England and France, with some exceptional outcasts, lived in circles of reciprocal admiration. Think how in New England the men of genius clustered together, how even the shy and reserved Hawthorne was rescued from a solitude that might have been bad for the man and damaging to his work, by the consciousness that in Cambridge and Concord, in the rear of Fields's shop, were

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\*Colonel Higginson in his "Life of Longfellow" says that Poe "took captive the cultivated but morbid taste of the French public." The words "but morbid" are not only a singular indictment of France, but an unwitting indictment of America, for Poe took captive the American reading public before France heard of him. Let us deliver Poe's work, if we cannot deliver his life, from international controversy. But even his work, accepted, individual, indisputable, classic, is troubled by another biographic folly — his debt to one Chivers. Chivers could not write poetry. Poe could. The debt is evident.

cultivated men who delighted to talk to him about his work and whose loyalty was gently critical and cherishing. Lafcadio Hearn — who has been compared to Poe — had friends whom he could not alienate by any freak of temper. And those friends encouraged him to self-expression in private letter and work of art.

Some such encouragement Poe received from J. P. Kennedy, a generous friend of young genius, and from the journalist, F. W. Thomas, whose admiration for Poe seems to have been affectionate and abiding. But among Poe's intimates were few large natures, few sound judgments to keep him up to his best. Long after his death he was honoured in Virginia as a local hero. The perfervid biography of him by Professor Harrison of the University of Virginia contrives to include all the great names and beautiful associations of the Old Dominion. But during his life Poe was not a favourite of the "best families" of Richmond. As well think of Burns as the child of cultivated Edinburgh, or of Whitman as the darling of Fifth Avenue. At the height of Poe's career in New York, between the appearance of "The Raven" and the time when poverty and illness claimed him irrecoverably, he appears as a lion in gatherings of the "literati." But, among them, his only affectionate friends were two or three women.

To the intellectual man who has no stalwart friends, who consumes his strength in a daily struggle against poverty and burns out his heart in vain pride, there remains sometimes the refuge of a home warm with family loyalty, full of happy incentive to labour, in spite of misfortune, and able perhaps

to coöperate with the genius of the household. Such refuge was not given to Poe. No man ever had a more cheerless place in which to set up his work-table. His wife was a child when he married her, and was still young when she died of consumption. His aunt and mother-in-law, who no doubt did her best with the few dollars which "Eddie" put into her hands, was an ignorant woman and probably had no idea what the careful rolls of manuscript were about, beyond the fact that they sometimes fetched a bit of money. Poe would have been excusable if he had sought and found outside his home some womanly consolation of a finer intellectual quality than his wife and aunt were able to offer. His writings are graced with poetic feminine spirits, not unlike Balzac's early dreams of an angel woman, visions that suggest vaguely the kind of soul with which he would have liked to commune. But he never found such a soul. He made several hysterical quests after swans, but they turned out geese, if not to him, certainly to the modern eye that chances to fall on their own memorials of the pursuit. None was of distinguished mind, and all were either innocent or prudent. If Poe, with his Gascon eloquence and compelling eye, rushed the fortress of propriety, nothing serious came of the adventure and nothing serious remains — only trivial gossip, silly correspondence, and quite gratuitous defences. It is a Barmecide feast for hungry scandal.

What has just been written may seem a negative and deprecating comment on Poe's story. But it gives truly, I believe, the drab setting in which his work gleams. And by depressing the high false lights that have been hung about his

head, we make more salient the virtue that was properly his, the proud independence of mind, the fixity of artistic purpose, the will which governed his imagination and kept it steadily at work in a poor chamber of life, creating beautiful things. However much or little we admire Poe's work, we must understand as a fact in biography that, from the first tales with which he emerged from obscurity to the half-philosophical piece with which, the year before his death, he sought to capture the universe and astound its inhabitants, his writings are the product of an excellent brain actuated by the will to create. He was a finical craftsman, patient in revision. He did not sweep upward to the heights of eloquence with blind, undirected power. He calculated effects. His delicate instrument did not operate itself while the engineer was absent or asleep. Deliberate, mathematical, alert, he marshalled his talents; and when he failed, which was seldom, he failed for lack of judgment, not for want of industry.

To labour for an artistic result with cool precision while hunger and disease are in the workshop; to revise, always with new excellence, an old poem which is to be republished for the third or fourth time in a cheap journal; to make a manuscript scrupulously perfect to please one's self — for there is to be no extra loaf of bread as reward, the market is indifferent to the finer excellences — this is the accomplishment of a man with ideals and the will to realize them. Let the most vigorous of us write in a cold garret and decide whether, on moral grounds, our persistent driving of our faculties entitles us to praise. Let us be so hungry that we



can write home with enthusiasm about the good breakfast in a bad New York boarding-house; and after it is all over let us imagine ourselves listening earthward from whatever limbo the moralists admit us to, and hearing a critic say that we have been untrue, not only to ourselves, but to our art. For so Dr. Goldwin Smith's ethical theory of art disposes of Poe, Poe who was never untrue to his art in his slenderest story, or lazy-minded in his least important criticism!

This confident man, who will measure the stars with equal assurance by the visions of poetry and the mathematics of astronomy, and set forth the whole truth of the universe in even, compact sentences such as no man can make by accident, lacks bedclothes to cover a dying wife — except the army overcoat which he had got at West Point sixteen years before. Says Trollope, the most self-possessed day-labourer in literature, "The doctor's vials and the ink-bottle held equal places in my mother's rooms. I have written many novels under many circumstances; but I doubt very much whether I could write one when my whole heart was by the bedside of a dying son. Her power of dividing herself into two parts, and keeping her intellect by itself, clear from the troubles of the world and fit for the duty it had to do, I never saw equalled. I do not think that the writing of a novel is the most difficult task which a man may be called upon to do; but it is a task that may be supposed to demand a spirit fairly at ease. The work of doing it with a troubled spirit killed Sir Walter Scott." Yes, and it helped to kill the self-reliant Balzac, a man of magnificent physique and ten-man-power brains, intended, as Gautier says, to be a cen-

tenarian, but exhausted and dead at fifty with twenty novels still in his head.

If Poe's work consisted of brilliant fragments, disconnected Coleridgean spurts of genius, the relation between his labours and his life, as it is erroneously conceived, would be easy to trace. His biography, if some things in it are underscored, furnishes reasons why his work should be ill-thought and confused; he has not been sufficiently credited with sturdy devotion to his task. That must be his merit as a man, and the ten volumes of his work established it. His tales may be "morbid," and his verses "very valueless." They required, to produce them, the sanest intelligence continuously applied.

On Poe's uneventful and meagre life there has been built up an apocryphal character, the centre of controversies kept awhirl by as strange a combination of prejudices and non-literary interests as ever vexed an author's reputation. Some of the controversies he made himself and bequeathed to posterity, for he was a child of Hagar.\* But the rest have been imposed on him by a world that loves art for talk's sake. Since he was a Virginian by adoption and in feeling, he has been tossed about in a belated sectionalism. Southerners have scented a conspiracy in New England to deprive him of his dues, even to keep him out of the Hall of Fame because he was not a Northerner! Englishmen and Frenchmen, far from the documents, have rescued his reputation from the neglect and miscomprehension of the savage nation

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\*As late as 1895, fifty years after the event, Thomas Dunn English, writing from the serenely uncontroversial atmosphere of the House of Representatives to Griswold's son, showed that he still regarded as a live issue a quarrel almost as comic as Whistler's quarrel with Ruskin, though far less witty.

where he had the misfortune to be born, and in pulling him up they have tumbled over backward. Only a year or two ago Mrs. Weiss's "Home Life of Poe," a stupid but sincere book by the only living lady who knew Poe, threatened to become a matter of international contention. It was to certain British admirers of Poe the vicious, slanderous voice of America directed against her greatest genius. As has been said, the newest fashion in biography, the pathological, makes Poe a "star" case and further confuses the facts. Echoes of neuropathological criticism find their way to American Sunday papers, which serve Poe up as a fascinating disease, with melancholy portraits and ravens spreading tenebrous wings above the columns of type. It is certainly a mad world, and in it, even if he had been a trifle crazy, Poe would still have been conspicuous for his sanity!

If Poe's spirit has not forgotten that in its earthly progress it perpetrated hoaxes, that it courted Byronic fame, that it advertised itself as an infant prodigy, that it made up adventures in Greece and France which its fleshly tenement did not, in point of fact, experience, that it took sardonic delight in mystifying the public, then it must see, in omniscient retrospect, a kind of grim justice in the game which the world is playing with its reputation. Nevertheless, it is unfitting that a man who did little worth remembering but write books, who lived in bleak alleys and dull places, should be haled up and down the main streets of gossip; that a poet who was, as one of his critics says, all head like a cherub, should be the subject of volumes and volumes which are concerned chiefly with his physical habits.

The main reason for Poe's posthumous misfortune may well be examined, for an understanding of it is necessary to an understanding of any of the books about him; moreover, it lies at the very heart of the institution of biography. We have seen that Poe was a friendless man. Griswold so affirmed just after Poe had departed, amid shadowy circumstances, from a life that was none too bright to the eye of the moralist, nor clear to the eye of the world. And Griswold straightway proved his assertion, for he was by his own declaration not Poe's friend, yet he was, in accordance with Poe's wish, appointed biographer and editor of the collected works. A man not a friend and not in sympathy with the work was the only acquaintance Poe had to whom to entrust his literary fortunes after he was dead — in itself a desolate comment on Poe's life. There is no other relation in literary history so strange, so unfortunate as this.

Griswold was an editor and anthologist of no mean ability. Upon one of his collections of poetry — now an interesting museum of antiquity where archæologists may study the literature of ancient America — Poe made acerbating, and no doubt discriminating, comments in a lecture. The report of the lecture angered Griswold. Poe's printed commentary is favourable, and we do not know just what he said in the lecture. He apologized to Griswold, for he was alert to the advantage of his own appearance in clusters of literary lights which Griswold might assemble later. Once, after an absence from his office in *Graham's Magazine*, he returned to find Griswold at his desk. He resigned immediately, so the story goes, in one of his costly outbursts of pride. Yet he

thought Griswold was his friend. He borrowed money from him, and when, the year before his death, he left New York for Richmond, he wrote to Griswold appointing him literary executor. Griswold's letter in which he accepted the office must have been friendly, for there is something like unwitting testimony on this point. When Poe read the letter in Richmond, a young girl, Susan Archer Weiss, was with him and noted that he was pleased.

After Poe's death Griswold published a severe but not untrue article in the *Tribune*, the famous article signed "Ludwig." Willis and Graham came to Poe's defence in good spirit. Griswold, rather piqued than chastened, prefixed to the third volume of Poe's work his memoir, since unnecessarily suppressed. And long afterward appeared his letter to Mrs. Whitman, written just after the *Tribune* article. In that letter he says, "I was not his friend, nor was he mine." Therein lies Griswold's perfidy, and not in the memoir itself. For when, coming from one of the later lives of Poe, one turns in a heat of indignation to Griswold, one finds nothing very bad and little that is untrue. Griswold merely emphasized the wrong things, and in so doing he became a monster among biographers. Through him, the Muse of Biography violated one of the important laws of her dominion. This law prescribes that the best of a man's life shall be told fully, and told first.

When a man dies, his letters and papers are put into the hands of one who loves and admires him, or who at least has no reluctance to celebrate him. The work of the first biographer is thrown to the world, where it undergoes scrutiny

and correction. The mark of commentators in time turns it gray, but the original ground is white. The thousands of human stories together make a vast whiteness. In the midst of this background a black official portrait, even though the blackness be lines of fact, becomes a libel. The Devil's Advocate occupies the place where God's Advocate is expected to speak. If the champion tells a dark tale, people think the truth must be darker still, for does not the champion put the best possible face on his hero? Proper tone is impossible to restore. Injustice is done irrevocably. What the friend admits the world doubly affirms.

The life-story that grows brighter with time is very rare. Joan of Arc is metamorphosed from a witch to a saint. Machiavelli is proved after centuries to have been not very "machiavellian." Bacon, another upholder of legal autocracy, is seen at last to have been a just and generous man, and not the figure which rising Puritanism made of him at the moment of his death and its triumph. But these are restorations of characters that flourished before the age when official biographies are looked for within a year or two after a man's death. Of the recently dead we are not yet scientific enough to tell the whole truth. The rights of friendship are recognized, and its duties taken for granted. If its support is withdrawn, the structure is awry. One has only to remember Henley's protest against Balfour's Stevenson, Purcell's life of Cardinal Manning, and Froude's Carlyle, to be reminded how strong is the obligation upon the friend, or the one holding the friend's office, not to emphasize the hero's blemishes.



Yet Henley said nothing against Stevenson except that Balfour's portrait was too sugary to be a true image of a man. Purcell only showed that Manning played politics, disliked Newman, and was anxious about what posterity should think of him. Froude, so far as we can discover, now that we no longer make Carlyle an object of that kind of hero-worship which he thought was good for us, said nothing damaging at all. He only protested too much in his prefaces that he was doing the right thing to draw Carlyle as he was. Yet, as late as 1900, I heard an editor of Carlyle say that Froude had blackened the Maister.

Such men as Carlyle and Stevenson and Manning settle back amid any biographic disturbance. They knock malicious or incompetent biographers off their feet, and burst the covers of little books. It is the poor fellow with an un-heroic soul that the biographer can confine and distort. It is the man of a middling compound of virtue and sin who can be sent down for a half century of misrepresentation by the hand of a treacherous friend. Biography, especially when it deals with the artist who has no part in the quarrels of creeds and politics, is wont to bear its hero along "with his few faults shut up like dead flowerets." Griswold startles the peaceful traffic by turning and running against the current of convention.

Later biographers have not served Poe by falling foul of Griswold. For he has the facts and is an able prosecuting attorney. And much harm has been done by emotional admirers of Poe who, as Mark Twain says of Dowden's Shelley, "hang a fact in the sky and squirt rainbows at it."

The error of Griswold, and of Poe's defenders, is an error of spirit, the delusion that Griswold's "charges" are momentous. After Griswold the story of Poe becomes a weaving and tangling of very small threads of fact. Every succeeding biographer has to take his cue from a powerful man who cannot be disregarded; and each biographer, in order as a faithful chronicler to do his part to straighten the story out, must put rubbish in his book. Even Mr. Woodberry, whose life is incomparably the best, shows the constraint imposed on him by wearisome problems, and loses his accustomed vitality and his essential literary enthusiasm.

It is too much to hope that the nebular Poe will be dispelled and the Poe of controversy be laid. Perhaps one should not hope for this, because it may be that, even as the Shakespeare myth is a necessary concomitant of the poet's greatness, the mythic Poe is a measure of his fame, and to attempt to destroy it may have the undesirable effect of seeming to belittle Poe. Nevertheless, in an age of grown-up judgments, it is time to cease confounding his magnificent fame with petty inquisitions and rhetorical defences. If sudden cessation is impossible, we can at least hope that more and more the trivialities of his life may recede, and the supreme triumph of his art stand forth unvexed and serene.

Poe's first important publication was the little volume of 1829, "Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems"; it is the birth of a star, set in the heavens secure amid the constellation where are Coleridge, Rossetti, Shelley, Mr. Yeats and some minor lyrists, perfect if not of first magnitude. Poe's poetry is akin to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," and his theory of

poetry is based upon Coleridge's. The theory, though Poe made much of it and though his essays on poetry are very fine, does not, obviously, account for his magic. Any one may have the theory — it is quite easy to understand. But that running of words into melodies so that they cease to be words and become song — that is the inexplicable act of genius. \*

Falling in wreaths through many a startled star.

The eternal voice of God is moving by,  
And the red winds are withering in the sky.

Spirit! that dwellest where,  
In the deep sky,  
The terrible and fair  
In beauty vie!

The sound of the rain  
Which leaps down to the flower,  
And dances again  
In the rhythm of the shower;  
The murmur that springs  
From the growing of grass  
Are the music of things.

These lines, all from "Al Aaraaf," are to be matched only in Poe's other work, in the poetry of Shelley, of Coleridge, of the British pre-Raphaelites whom he inspired, and of others who dream among the stars and hear words as they never sound in the common ear of day. Poe made only a few poems, and most of them are perfect — "Spirits of the Dead," "The City in the Sea," "To Helen," "Israfel," "To

One in Paradise," "The Haunted Palace," "The Conqueror Worm," "Dreamland," "For Annie," "A Dream Within a Dream," "Eldorado." To my ear these poems are finer than the more obvious metrifications of "The Raven," "Annabel Lee," "Ulalume," and "The Bells." Poe regarded "The Raven" as his best poem, and it is the most popular, but wonderful as it is, haunting as is its music and the music of "Ulalume," it seems to me that Poe is imitating Poe. Just so that other amazing master of a technique that no one else can handle, Swinburne, sometimes writes verse that is like himself but is not quite pure Swinburne; and Francis Thompson, sometimes in the very act of showing his mastery of odd and intricate forms, makes you stop listening and watch the verbal arrangements shape themselves on the page. This is a danger that Poe does not avoid; his virtuosity interrupts the song with something like an undertone of boasting, like De Pachmann at the piano. "The Raven" interests, but does not charm. However, Poe tells us that a good critique on a poem cannot be written by one who is no poet himself. Humbled by that rebuke, we can silently approve all his verse. There is very little of it; he attained the stars on a short flight of song; no other American pages contain so much beauty in so little space. No other American poet has been so unanimously accepted by all the poets of the world. There is no dissenting voice, not even the voice of Whitman, who accepted Poe at last despite his lack of sympathy with Poe's demoniac blackness of spirit. Of those who are less than poets but read poetry, there may be some, not wholly consignable to outer darkness, who cannot

respond to Poe. Unhappy people, they will be always shut out

From the regions which  
Are Holy Land!

Poe would have liked to give all his energy to poetry, but poetry does not boil the pot, and fortunately his versatile genius included a gift for writing tales. With his sure critical tact Poe estimated his fiction correctly in the name he gave it: "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque." They are fantastic, visionary, unearthly, intended to produce a mood, to send a *frisson* through the reader. Everything, the very colour of the words, is cunningly adapted to this purpose. Amid the varied powerful fictions of the nineteenth century Poe's stories seem thin and not of first-rate importance. The great tragic novels and the deeply moving short stories of our age not only overcast our emotions with shadows and give strange colouring to the world, but deal with human life and true passions; they are therefore more potent than the superficial grotesquery of Poe. His are flat designs, to be appreciated and enjoyed by the eye and the ear. At their best they are creepy and fascinating and subtle; they give an atmosphere of strange places and climates not known to the weather bureau, but we have had so much mighty fiction since Poe that we are *blasés*; we can read him all night without a shiver. The same thing, I think, is true of Stevenson's tales. I do not know if Stevenson was a great admirer of Poe, but he certainly lived in an era that had been strongly influenced by Poe and the French

writers that followed him. It is a cool pleasure to watch Stevenson put Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde through their changes, and it is with clear intellectual delight that one reads "Markheim" and sees Death present himself as the last guest at the house of "Will o' the Mill"; whereas a story by Maupassant or Dostoïevski, or even Dickens's highly inartistic and very great "Christmas Carol," leaves one aching. Mr. Poe and Mr. Stevenson do not overwhelm, nor does that other exquisite master of the eerie tale, Hawthorne. Poe plays with psychological moods abstracted from experience and so wholly and deliberately of one tone that incredulity does not forget itself and unbar the gates to the inner passages of a reader's nature. Granting this limitation, nay, insisting on it as necessary to the full appreciation of Poe's tales, one can then praise them unreservedly. "William Wilson," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Fall of the House of Usher" are quite perfect things. In his admirable criticism of Hawthorne, Poe defines the limits of the tale, and that means, of course, the limits which Poe intended or recognized in his own tales:

"A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step." After that, if we read the first sentence of "The Fall of the House of Usher," we find Poe



has let us into his secret — but none except Poe can make a Poesque tale.

Poe has puzzled some readers who, taking too literally the addresses of other poets to the heavenly muses, have come to believe that a great artist is one who sits with a halo round his head, an amanuensis of some capricious deity who has chosen to fill him with inspiration. They think that because Poe talks of his methods with such jaunty assurance, with such an air of the prestidigitator who kindly shows the audience how the last little trick was done, he is not truly inspired, but is confessedly and peculiarly artificial. He is precisely as artificial as art always is. He has singular ability and willingness to turn one part of his mind upon the other and examine his own creative processes. This is the action of his critical faculty, which all great artists have, but which not all choose to put into essays on literary technique. Poe is a great critic of himself and of others. Writing apropos of himself he becomes our first philosophic student of literary technique and æsthetics. Writing apropos of books which the day's work brings him to review, he becomes our first judicial and dogmatic critic.

Whether Poe is "right" or "wrong" in his critical judgments is not important. He has something to say while he is sitting on the bench, and he expresses himself admirably. Never once does he write as if he had not considered what a particular book and the entire literature of the universe meant to him. Even in the course of the most trivial review he manages to suggest something valuable about literature. His judgments, except when he overpraises some perishable

poetry whose author happens to stand in his good graces, are not so much wrong as vigorously different from those of other people. He was unlike any one that the American press had ever seen before; he was assertive, competent, and had a slashing disrespect and toplofty independence which seemed like a new sort of literary honesty. In one sense Poe is thoroughly independent and honest. He never expresses other people's opinions except when he agrees with them, and then he repeats them as his own; like many other intensely original men he is a shameless plagiarist, and he turns off ideas gathered from Coleridge and Macaulay with a divine assumption of discovery, which later critics (some of them incapable of any original idea) easily trace back to the source.

Poe was a devoted servant of literature. He loved what is good. Some of his diamonds were paste, and one suspects that he knew it, that he was sometimes a trifle disingenuous in "writing up" for the public, on whose suffrages his bread depended, the paste whose glitter the public likes. But on the whole he struck blows for what he liked. His critical papers which are of permanent value are his essays on the technique of poetry and his appreciations of Dickens, Hawthorne, Mrs. Browning, Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Lowell. His retort to Lowell is a bit of ungular sparring, which it is stimulating to read now in a day of dull truce, when every well-bred critic is too polite or too timid to say anything pugnacious. Lowell had shown his claws in his "Fable for Critics," and Poe in revenge caustically applies his acute sense of metre to Lowell's rattling impromptu. He had so

much intellectual acumen that, although the gods had not made him a humourist, he could by sheer force of intellect write wittily — and write well, always well. His feeblest paper about the deepest buried celebrity among the “literati” is written by a man who understands the literary craft through and through. Criticism is valuable not in so far as it tells the truth and nothing but the truth about a book (for it can never do that), but in so far as it expresses an unusual, an individual mind; it reveals the critic rather than the thing criticised. When Mr. Henry James speaks of Poe’s “very valueless verses,” he tells nothing about the poet, because for half a century other people, including the unanimous company of poets, the highest authorities, have found the verses very valuable. But he does tell us something about Mr. James’s interesting mind; he confesses that his auditory system is defective. Similarly, the following passage from Mr. James’s “Life of Hawthorne” explains Mr. James in some measure, but it does not explain Poe.

“There was,” says Mr. James, “but little literary criticism in the United States at the time Hawthorne’s earlier works were published; but among the reviewers Edgar Poe perhaps held the scales the highest. He, at any rate, rattled them loudest, and pretended more than any one else to conduct the weighing process on scientific principles. Very remarkable was this process of Edgar Poe’s and very extraordinary were his principles; but he had the advantage of being a man of genius and his intelligence was frequently great. His collection of critical sketches of the American writers flourishing in what M. Taine would call his *milieu* and *moment* is very

curious and interesting reading, and it has one quality which ought to keep it from ever being completely forgotten. It is probably the most exquisite specimen of *provincialism* ever prepared for the edification of man. Poe's judgments are pretentious, spiteful, vulgar; but they contain a great deal of sense and discrimination as well, and here and there, sometimes at frequent intervals, we find a phrase of happy insight imbedded in a patch of the most fatuous pedantry."

Note how this latter-day critic tries to make Poe conform with the critic's prejudices and obsessions. In the first place, Poe is seldom pretentious, because he does not have to pretend; he is in full possession of a rare literary proficiency and has no occasion to be pretentious. In the second place, he is not vulgar, because he is a unique and original person, having little in common with current, that is, vulgar, ideas and ways; the extraordinary can be objectionable, offensive, but it cannot be vulgar. Finally, consider Poe's collection of critical sketches as "the most exquisite specimen of provincialism ever prepared for the edification of man." Poe's collection is an accident of journalism; after his death the trivialities of his day's work were assembled from the petty magazines. Let us compare the list of persons criticised by Mr. Poe, an American poet enforced by circumstance to be a hack reviewer, with the list of persons criticised in "Lives of the Poets" by the great Doctor Johnson, whom the booksellers hired to write introductions to poets whom they, not he, had chosen to reprint. Poe's list contains fifty-five names that mean nothing, and thirteen names still regarded as important. Johnson's list contains twenty-eight names no one of which

suggests a line of verse to a fairly assiduous reader of British poetry, and the names of fifteen memorable poets. Poe's Welby, Mowatt, Hoyt, Bogart and the rest are no more exquisitely provincial than Johnson's Stepney, Duke, Yalden, Mallett and the others. The two lists, seen in the light not of a theory but of known historic facts, show that the preservation of nonentities in the immortal fluid of a great man's reputation is not a matter of provincialism but of "diurnalism"; they are equal commentaries on the life of unprosperous genius which has to turn its attention to obscure or insignificant persons, in obedience to popular demand. Johnson's booksellers make selections from two centuries of British poetry, for publication in dignified bound volumes. Poe pretends to be writing for a local magazine mostly about contemporaneous persons, late books of prose and verse. It is somewhat beside the point, but nevertheless worth saying, that the great Doctor Johnson does not know a poem when he sees one, that it is he who recommends to the booksellers the inclusion of Yalden, Pomfret, Blackmore and Watts; Poe's perception is instantaneous, and even when he is discoursing of a poetaster as dead and buried, as are most of Johnson's "poets," he says something fine and searching about the art of verse. However, the point is not to contrast Johnson's dense surdity with Poe's almost invariable sensitiveness, but to see Poe against his historical background and remember that he did not choose the "literati" to represent his idea of the best in literature.

Poe's last work is "Eureka," a book that few have curiosity to read, and still fewer understand. It is a prose poem of

great beauty, doubly interesting because it is not in the misty mood that one would expect of a poet, but is a piece of modern rationalism. Poe saw the stars calmly and saw them cold and mathematical in their habits. He was so impressed with the finality of his vision and his triumphant solution of the cosmos that he chose a title since rendered trite by commercial inventors. Like all other philosophers he failed to find the whole truth, and few responded to his cry of discovery, but he did something that should be better known in the history of nineteenth-century thought. He saw the universe as a material process; he, the dreamer of dreams, poetizes a scientific conception of the world without a trace of oriental superstition. Most other quasi-philosophic poetry of his time is allied with German idealism and Christian mysticism. Poe was the single voice of protest against transcendental cosmology. He was not in possession of all the available scientific knowledge of his day, but he was in accord with the spirit of scientific materialism. In this and in other respects he was akin to Shelley. These poets are better thinkers than prosaic thinkers are ready to acknowledge. Israfel, plucking his lyre in the sky, understands that the stars and all the songs that praise them are physical phenomena.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Edgar (Allan) Poe was born in Boston, January 19, 1809. He died in Baltimore, October 7, 1849. His parents were actors. In 1811 he was adopted by John Allan. In 1815 he was taken to England and sent to Manor House School,



near London. In 1826 he went to the University of Virginia, which he left because his foster father did not approve his conduct. In 1827 he enlisted in the United States Army. He was honourably discharged in 1829. In 1830 he entered West Point. The next year he was dismissed. The course of his life from 1831 to 1833 is obscure. In 1833 he received a prize of one hundred dollars for "A Ms. Found in a Bottle." In 1835 he was assistant editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In 1836 he married his cousin, Virginia Clemm. The next year he settled in Philadelphia. In 1839 he was associate editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. In 1841 he became editor of *Graham's Magazine*. In 1844 he moved to New York City and became assistant editor of the *Evening Mirror*. The next year he was manager of the *Broadway Journal*. Virginia Clemm Poe died in 1847. The last months of his life he spent in Richmond.

His works are: *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, 1827; *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*, 1829; *Poems*, 1831; *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, 1838; *The Conchologist's First Book*, 1839; *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, 1840; *The Raven and Other Poems*, 1845; *Tales*, 1845; *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, 1848; *The Literati* (in *Godey's Lady's Book*, 1846), 1850; *Collected Works*, 1850.

The best biography of Poe is that by George E. Woodberry in two volumes, published in 1909, an amplification of his "Life" in *American Men of Letters*. Only a reader who has laboured through many volumes of Poe biography can realize how sane and discriminative is Mr. Woodberry's early study. His extended work is final and wholly satis-

factory. "The Life and Letters of Poe," by James A. Harrison, contains much interesting matter, but it is floridly sentimental and ornate. Excellent essays are those by Emile Hennequin in "Ecrivains Francisés," and Mr. John M. Robertson in "Essays Toward a Critical Method." The introductory essay to Putnam's edition of Poe by Professor Charles F. Richardson is very good, as is also the essay by Andrew Lang in the edition of Poe's Poems published in London by Kegan, Paul Trench & Co. in 1883. French essays about Poe are numerous, many of them interesting and suggestive.

## CHAPTER IX

### HOLMES

AMERICAN literature is less strong in the mood of passionate contemplation — the serenest mood of art — than in the mood of revolt, exhortation, divine discontent with some aspects of the world. The more powerful writers, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Whittier, Mark Twain, are in opposition to things as they are; they are men of radical convictions, which they try to impress on the reader through satire, sermons, inspired journalism, intense occasional verse. I do not mean that the spirit of propaganda, aggressive belief, is their only driving impulse, but the fire of the reformer is in them all; they are, each in his way, glorious cranks, and they are the most virile personalities in our literature.

Holmes's views have been familiar for fifty years, and he now seems on the whole a witty, finely bred old gentleman, expressing over the teacups ideas that are mild and respectable, certainly not dynamitical. It is to-day a little difficult to realize that he, too, was a revolter, that the first numbers of the *Atlantic Monthly*, made precious by "The Autocrat," encountered opposition among some of the conventional religious barbarians who were a dull majority in our free and independent country. Holmes is the unsuperstitious man of the world, the rationalist, the spokesman of what in

his time is radical science, protesting against the theological attitude toward life. His mind is inquisitive, discursive, fanciful, but very solidly sane. His manner is consciously well-bred, conciliatory, even elegant — a very innocent mask for some loaded guns that he fires while looking unconcernedly at something else. Having inspected the world and found it out, he does not attack it at full cry like a reformer; but in perfectly modulated tones, in a voice twinkling with laughter, though seldom yielding to the full chest tones of mirth, he discourses urbanely of men and their ways. Without quite knowing whence the shot came, the enemy has received a blow fairly amidships. Holmes touches profundities with an assumption of amateurish inquiry, which with him is a method of humour, and not, as with Matthew Arnold, a dodging, unconvincing modesty.

Because of Holmes's rationalism and urbanity, and also because his verse has a carven finish and intellectual glitter, he has been often referred to the eighteenth century which is preëminent for its town-bred essayists and witty versifiers. His biographer, Mr. Morse, draws up a comic list of essayists to whom the Autocrat has been likened, and sagely concludes that Holmes is Holmes. The Autocrat is as Addisonian as any one cares to find him, or as much like Lamb as some one else cares to find him. But, after all, the essayist is a distinctive individual; indeed, his quality as an essayist depends on his difference from other people. The essay is a rare form which few men have been able to make so well that their collected discourses are numbered among the great books of the world. Unlikely as it may seem, if one has not

thought of it before, English literature contains more good novels and poems than essays. It may be that the essayist's quality is rarely given to a man of letters; and it may be that the great literary imaginations arrive at success in the other forms of art, so that the essay is made up of the otherwise unused fragments of genius. The apparent superiority of the eighteenth century in the essay is in part due to the lack of wealth in the other forms of writing, just as a kind of clear, shapely, intellectual verse seems to be peculiar to the eighteenth century because there is in that age so little beautiful emotional poetry. The nineteenth-century essayists are really more numerous and greater than those of the eighteenth century, but they are not relatively so prominent because they are surrounded by a varied profusion of genius of other types. Holmes is the single great discursive essayist that America has bound in its slender sheaf of literary harvest. It is easy, but not profoundly critical to say, "Holmes — essayist, and witty poet — eighteenth century, noted for essays and witty poems — ah, yes, Holmes had a belated eighteenth-century mind." The truth is he was a very modern man, wholly of his time and place. In form, in substance he is no closer to the eighteenth century than is Emerson or Thoreau. In the topics he discusses, in the nervous eclectic variety of his mind, he is characteristic of his day and generation.

It was Addison's ambition "to have it said of me that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell at clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses." That expresses Addison even more

perfectly than he realized, and not so flatteringly as he would have wished. He was an academic turned journalist. Seen across the splendour of the nineteenth century, the philosophy that he fetched out of colleges and libraries is jejune. Perfect in a narrow way, exquisitely phrased, it is not a very rich body of matter which Addison delivered from obscurity to the limited light of a few prosperous breakfast tables. Addison and Steele are triflers, all the better in their way for being triflers. Holmes is a well-stored modern man. Moreover his is a foreward-looking, not a backward-looking mind. Despite all recent rapid changes of ideas and the silencing, if not the disappearance, of some prejudices that he attacked, he is closer to us than to any time before him. His old-fashioned garment is a dramatic costume, as was Lamb's. "The Autocrat" is a fresh, day-lit, life-lit book, tingling with present day issues, though we have lost the sense of stir which it made in the obdurate bosom of Calvinism. We do not recognize ourselves in the breakfast-eaters to whom Mr. Addison condescended so charmingly; indeed, it were better on some mornings to go back to bed if there were nothing more vital in the world than the *Spectator* brings. But the Autocrat is our neighbour. He can keep one up at night. Here is a champion of our kind of thought, a spirited, though half-disguised controversialist, a believer in intellectual courage, in which our world, Holmes's Boston especially, is, at this advanced date, deplorably lacking. "You never need think you can turn over any old falsehood without a terrible squirming and scattering of the horrid little population that dwells under it." So speaks Doctor Holmes of Beacon Street,



our contemporary, though not the contemporary of the intellectual decadence of Beacon Street. "Do I think that the particular form of lying often seen in newspapers, under the title 'From Our Foreign Correspondent' does any harm? Why, no, I don't know that it does. I suppose it doesn't really deceive people any more than the 'Arabian Nights' or 'Gulliver's Travels' do." There speaks our contemporary, though not the contemporary of the men who edited the newspapers that the boy brought this morning.

The Autocrat came full-blooded and shapely of limb from the brow of humour, a new form, a new manner. There is nothing like it in the whole range of *causerie*.

Master alike in speech and song  
Of Fame's great antiseptic, Style,  
You with the classic few belong,  
Who tempered wisdom with a smile.

He belongs with the classic few, as Lowell says, because the classic is a man who does something that other classics have not done. He joins them by writing a book in his own way without too much regard for established immortals. "The Autocrat" is a new mode of essay, "every man his own Boswell." It pretends to be a record of talk, and thereby gains the privileges of talk without sacrificing the advantages of literary phrasing when that is needed to put the thought in order. It is free from the rigours of the formal essay and secures a natural right to circle over the universe, alighting when it will and soaring when it will. (Holmes's grotesque delicious image is "putting his straw in the bung

of the universe.") The table-talkers, Selden, Hazlitt, Coleridge have left fine fragments, epigrammatic, witty; sententious, poetical, of the conversational man or rather of the monologuizing man. Holmes, with an instinctive dramatic sense, favours a broader idea of human talk. He embodies himself in a variety of mouthpieces. The characters afford him opportunity to say things that he really means but which a Brahman physician might not care to express *propria voce*. He enjoys in himself and others the habit of the human mind of jumping from topic to topic, and his table-talk form enables him to indulge the enjoyment. He drops with apparent casualness the conclusion of a life-long reflection on a pet idea, and then turns lightly to something else, so that the favourite thought does not betray how much the author thinks of it. Holmes was nearly fifty when he wrote "The Autocrat" and he had written little prose before; he drew on the untouched treasures of a mind at vigorous maturity, stocked full of experience.

It is from experience that he dips oftenest and deepest. He is a reader, an amateur of books, but not a bookish man. He disliked criticism and refused to become one of the *Atlantic* reviewers. His statistical enumeration of Emerson's multitudinous references to literature reveals rather respectful amusement than admiration. He lectured on the English poets and was cordially applauded, but of this literary excursion nothing is remembered except the verses with which he concluded each discourse. Whenever he speaks of books, in "The Autocrat" or "The Professor," he speaks with unerring perspicacity and individuality of judgment.

This single sentence in "The Professor" expresses Wordsworth in a flash: "Read the sonnet, if you please; it is Wordsworth all over — trivial in subject, solemn in style, vivid in description, prolix in detail, true metaphysically, but immensely suggestive of 'imagination,' to use a mild term when related as an actual fact of a sprightly youngster." That is the sort of condensed criticism which one finds in Lamb's letters. The American essayists who were Holmes's friends, especially Lowell and Emerson, are buried in books. They are thick with allusions which send a reader often to the library, and that is part of their service as humanists, diffusers of culture. Holmes makes you close his book, with your finger between the pages, and let your fancy run on what he has been saying. He stands on his own feet thinking about life and does not sit on the shoulders of the literary giants of the ages.

Yet few of his more bookish contemporaries, devoted to purely literary questions, write so well as he does; only Hawthorne, of the New Englanders, equals him in unbroken perfection of style. Holmes is one of the masters of style in whose phrasing there is no technical flaw, no expression blurred and but loosely approximate to the thought. His prose and his verse are free from false verbal notes. There is in his work not one of those sentences that somehow get neglected in the practical business of making manuscript, and which suffer for the healing touch of proofreader or editor. This is the more remarkable in view of the range of Holmes's thought. He expresses a great many kinds of idea. (The very index to "The Autocrat" is a work of

humour.) He leaps from witty fooling and whimsicalities to some puzzling problem of psychology which he fetches into the light of his transparent logical style; then with an instinctive avoidance of tedium and long explanation, he leaves the problem and passes to a bit of sentiment, often on a high plane of feeling, where he is equally sure and in command of the resources of language. For cross-play of whimsicality over restrained and honest pathos, you will look long before you find anything better than this from "My Hunt After the Captain."

"In the first car, on the fourth seat to the right, I saw my Captain; there saw I him, even my firstborn, whom I had sought through many cities.

"How are you, Boy?"

"How are you, Dad?"

"Such are the proprieties of life, as they are observed among us Anglo-Saxons of the nineteenth century, decently disguising those natural impulses that made Joseph, the Prime Minister of Egypt, weep aloud so that the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard — nay, which had once overcome his shaggy old uncle Esau so entirely that he fell on his brother's neck and cried like a baby in the presence of all the women. But the hidden cisterns of the soul may be filling fast with sweet tears, while the windows through which it looks are undimmed by a drop or a film of moisture."

His thoughts on love in "The Professor" are beautiful, at once speculative and humane. He slips once or twice into the mists of poetical metaphysics (on the verge of the region

where Emerson wanders in his essay on Love), but comes swiftly back to the persons at the table. He seldom quite lets go his moorings in life.

"The Autocrat" is the cream of a man's mind at fifty. Had he said the best that he had to say, and would the next book be a limping sequel unable to keep the pace of its predecessor? There are those who find "The Professor" even better than "The Autocrat." Indeed it is a deepening and ripening of the Autocrat's method and quality of thought. The Professor argues a little more at length, moves more steadily in one subject, with less fantastic flitting, fewer wayward excursions in pursuit of lateral analogies. The old verve is there, with an admixture of a sharper satire. There is a reason why "The Autocrat" should have had a sequel. That gentle old fellow had, to his surprise, started some controversies by the fresh candour of his thoughts on life and religion. These controversies suggested new ideas, but they were not for the Autocrat to take up; they would have been out of character. The Professor is the man to resume some of these argumentative ideas and press them home. The Professor, of course, is an avowedly learned man and accustomed to lecture, whereas the Autocrat is only an amateur talker. The Professor's *bête noir* is orthodoxy. He is an impartial critic of the various learned occupations; he shows that the theological attitude is not peculiar to theologians, and strikes hard at pseudo-science in his own realm of thought.

"Little Boston" is an excellent character. His local patriotism, slightly caricatured, is a page from the Doctor's own

book of life. That is a delightful way to express an idea, to let it run to overstatement in the talk of a character, and then shave it off and modify it in the true first person! Iris is rather shadowy, a feminine vision for a wise middle-aged man to enwrap in gracious ideas. The "boy John" is a bit of low-comedy realism, which the Doctor has brought in for the express purpose of unseating himself when he gallops too long on a high horse.

The book has a central idea (outside the story of Iris); its thesis is humanity in science and theology. It is an ultimate apology for the medical profession, doubly persuasive for its frank acknowledgment of weaknesses in the Æsculapian brotherhood. It pleads for and expresses the humanity of learning and is a shrewd antidote to pedantry, pseudo-science and religious buncombe. One reason that "The Professor" seems to a young New Englander so tinglingly alive, so contemporaneous, is that the delusions it doughtily pulled to pieces still flourish; we need the book at least as much as our fathers needed it.

"The Poet" and "Over the Teacups" are written in the Doctor's inimitable manner, or perhaps it would be fair to say in the manner that only Holmes could imitate. They suffer in comparison with himself alone. The sources of good talk are by no means run dry, though the stream is a little thinner. Holmes is not one of those whom popularity induced to write too much. He lived a long life, and his complete works are but a modest dozen volumes.

His success in portraying characters and making them talk in the true idioms of life encouraged him to write a novel.



"Elsie Venner" is an ingenious story, and it needs not to be said that it is well written; Holmes did not know how otherwise to write. But he had not the gifts of the genuine novelist. He might have discovered them in himself if he had begun to look for them at thirty instead of at fifty. The manager of "Elsie Venner" is the Professor; he shows through delightfully at times, in spite of the shivery tale. Perhaps we do not shiver now; for we have lived through Ibsen and other men of tragic genius, whose "problems" are more intense and harrowing than any idea of the Doctor's. "Elsie Venner" excites in us intellectual interest and gives the pleasure which a fine mind always offers even in some form of literature to which it is not best adapted. "The Guardian Angel," another tale strung on a curious thesis, is more delightful than "Elsie Venner." It is written in a lower key. If the Professor is stage manager of "Elsie Venner," the director of "The Guardian Angel" is the Autocrat. The first half of the book, where the problems of the plot have not begun to close in and demand of the author a skill that he does not quite possess, is as full of wise fun as so many pages of the breakfast-table series.

From the time when Holmes, at twenty-one, struck the public fancy with his stirring, boyish verses, "Old Ironsides," he was known as a writer of occasional poetry; he is perhaps the most uniformly skilful and delightful maker of rhymes in commemoration of local events to be found in English literature. He was ambitious to be known as a poet, as is every man of letters who has tasted at all of the divinest spring. His verses are among the most graceful

pages of "The Autocrat," and in their kind they are perfect. As he never wrote poor prose, so he never wrote bad poetry. And yet — he is not a poet of lofty rank. He is a neat versifier of humour, sentiment, and friendship, fundamentally sincere and dexterous in touching his modest lyre. There are several such poets in the nineteenth century whom we could ill spare and whose volumes we thumb as often, perhaps, as the works of the great poets: for example, Gilbert, Hood, Praed, Thackeray, Locker-Lamson, Calverley. They are the pleasantest companions and they are very fine technical metrists. The great note they do not attempt. Holmes's most ambitious poem, the one which he was most eager to have remembered as poetry, is "The Chambered Nautilus." To me it seems an elaborated conceit, pretty but not moving. The best of his poems is "The Last Leaf," which touches with a fine tenderness, through a playfully turned stanza, the true pathos of age. "Wind-Clouds and Star Drifts," elevated in thought and well done in its way, is cold as prose. As the Poet at the Breakfast Table himself says of the verses: "They were evidently written honestly, and with feeling, and no doubt meant to be reverential." But the inexplicable inspiration never descended upon the Autocrat-Poet-Professor. The prose passage in "The Autocrat" about the sea and the mountains is essentially better poetry than any of Holmes's verse:

"The sea remembers nothing. It is feline. It licks your feet; its huge flanks purr very pleasantly for you; but it will crack your bones and eat you, for all that, and wipe the crimsoned foam from its jaws as if nothing had happened.

The mountains give their lost children berries and water; the sea mocks their thirst and lets them die. The mountains have a grand, stupid, lovable tranquillity; the sea has a fascinating, treacherous intelligence. The mountains lie about like huge ruminants, their broad backs awful to look upon but safe to handle. The sea smoothes its silver scales until you cannot see their joints, but their shining is that of a snake's belly, after all. In deeper suggestiveness I find as great a difference. The sea drowns out humanity and time; it has no sympathy with either; for it belongs to eternity, and of that it sings its monotonous song for ever and ever."

In the poetry of light sentiment, of humour and sparkling word-play Holmes is perfectly successful. He is the best possible maker of after-dinner verses. The spirit of college festivals and friendly reunions he caught and spun into cunning rhymes, not once but in fifty pieces. "The Deacon's Masterpiece" and "The Broomstick Train" possess that unquestionable merit which is settled once for all by the fact that no one else ever did anything like them. The Brahman Doctor had only one peer in the versifying of Yankee humour and that was his neighbour across the river, Mr. Hosea Biglow.

Holmes belonged to the prosperous comfortable classes. He took very much to heart some of the problems of his time, the intellectual and religious problems. He was a very keen and advanced investigator of some questions of psychology, and no man ever phrased scientific knowledge more perspicuously for the layman. But life for him was easy, and he saw things from the sunny side of a clean street.

Lowell early accused him of indifference to political and social reform, to which Holmes replied most winningly, half confessing the charge. He believed in good family, in the refinements of wealth, and was an apologist of the privileged whom wealth and opportunity surround with the graces of life to which he was very sensitive. He looked with humorous but distant sympathy on any democratic idea that happened to be current (and a good many queer forms of democratic ideas were current), but he remained closely within the shelter of caste. His point of view is frankly New England, not broadly American, certainly not of a world-social scope. His attitude toward life is that of a gently satirical romantic. He does not understand realism in literature nor the social structure that at bottom unites, say, the Autocrat's landlady with the ancestral advantage which the Autocrat thinks a young man ought to have. The individual specimen of human nature he inspects quizzically, affectionately. He writes for the few, not the many; he addresses those who can catch an idea as it flies. His odd combination of logic and fantasy makes his work a continuous delight; the process of his thought as he unfolds it is fascinating, and he himself watches it with a delighted sense of surprise. He is the most modest of egotists, and, except when he is attacking an enemy (always a generalized intellectual enemy, never a personal one), he suggests rather than asserts. His intellectual curiosity warily eludes closed final statements; to him the universe is going on all the time and was not concluded with the last remark that any of us happened to regard as ultimate. Every imagination that meets his is stimulated to

go on thinking about a world that is so full of a number of things.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 29, 1809. He died in Boston, October 7, 1894. He was graduated from Harvard in 1829 and studied medicine in Boston and Paris. In 1836 he began to practise medicine. From 1847 to 1882 he was professor of Anatomy at the Harvard Medical School. He made one or two original discoveries in medicine, one of which led him into controversy with older physicians; the Professor in the laboratory is almost as interesting as at the breakfast table, for he wields the same competent pen. Except for a visit to Europe in 1886, Holmes spent his long life in Boston and Beverley. In 1840 he married Amelia Lee Jackson.

His chief works are: *Poems*, 1836; *Homœopathy and Its Kindred Delusions*, 1842; *Poems*, 1846, 1849, 1850, 1862; *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, 1858; *The Professor at the Breakfast Table*, 1860; *Elsie Venner*, 1861; *Songs in Many Keys*, 1861; *Soundings from the Atlantic*, 1863; *Humorous Poems*, 1865; *The Guardian Angel*, 1867; *The Poet at the Breakfast Table*, 1872; *Songs of Many Seasons*, 1874; *Memoir of Motley*, 1878; *The Iron Gate*, 1880; *Pages from an Old Volume of Life*, 1883; *Medical Essays*, 1883; *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1884; *The New Portfolio*, 1885-6; *A Mortal Antipathy*, 1885; *Our Hundred Days in Europe*, 1887; *Before the Curfew*, 1888; *Over the Teacups*, 1890.

The complete biography is "The Life and Letters of

Holmes" by Mr. John Tyler Morse. Mr. S. M. Crothers has in preparation the volume on Holmes for the *American Men of Letters Series*. One can confidently recommend it in advance of publication, for Mr. Crothers is the most genial essayist "discovered" and encouraged by the *Atlantic Monthly* since Lowell induced Holmes to write for the first number.



## CHAPTER X

### THOREAU

WHEN Thoreau died, Emerson wrote: "The country knows not yet, or in the least part how great a son it has lost." In fifty years the country, the world, has learned more of this great son. Friends and editors have assembled one by one the eleven volumes of the standard edition; and the recent publication of his complete journal indicates that there are readers who regard the least of his notes as worthy of preservation. The growing cult of the open air, the increasing host of amateur prodigals returning to nature, have given fresh vogue to his sketches of woods and waters. But, for all that, the man is not yet fully understood. Lowell's unsympathetic essay, product of a mind from which poetry and youth had evaporated, and of a social outlook grown conventionally decorous, has carried inevitable authority. Like Macaulay's essay on Bacon and Jeffrey's blundering miscomprehension of Wordsworth, it is an example of how one great reputation may for a period smother and distort another. Stevenson's popular essay, written in his half dramatic attitude of athletic good-cheer and arm-in-arm sympathy with a hooray-boy world, is based on a misconception of Thoreau's character and his message as a whole. It overemphasizes the gentle reservation with

which Emerson tempers his praise. Emerson in a few words sets forth the rounded integrity of Thoreau's work and personality; in one place he makes a comment upon his fellow-philosopher's proneness to negation and opposition. The comment, in its place, is just to Thoreau and expresses Emerson's more inclusive amiability. Stevenson singles out from Emerson's total estimate the negative characteristic, and stiffens it into an anti-social asceticism which is not foreign to Thoreau's nature but is by no means its dominant quality.

That original minds stand above the comprehension of mediocre minds of their own period and of later times is a fact observable everywhere in the history of the human intellect. More than that, some minds are not merely above the common herd; they are in advance of the best culture of their day and must await the intelligence of later generations to give them full recognition. Emerson and Holmes were as comprehensible to their generation as to ours. Whitman and Thoreau were trail-blazers; they went before to survey regions where later comers find a broad highway. Thoreau's vision shot beyond the horizon which bounded and still bounds the sight even of that part of the world which fancies itself liberal and emancipated.

"I am," says Thoreau, "a poet, a mystic and a transcendentalist." He was all that, and, moreover, he was an anarchist. He was the one anarchist of great literary power in a nation of slavish conformity to legalism, where obedience to statute and maintenance of "order" are assiduously inculcated as patriotic virtues by the social powers which profit from other peoples' docility. "Walden" and "A Week on

the Concord and Merrimac Rivers" have been accepted as classics. The essays on "Forest Trees" and "Wild Apples" were to be found in a school reader twenty-five years ago. But the ringing revolt of the essay on "Civil Disobedience" is still silenced under the thick respectability of our times. The ideas in it could not to-day be printed in the magazine which was for years owned by the publishers of Thoreau's complete works. Boston Back Bay would shiver! It would not do, really, to utter aloud Thoreau's ideas in a society whose leading university, Thoreau's alma mater, has recently ruled, "that the halls of the university shall not be open for persistent or systematic propaganda on contentious questions of contemporaneous social, economic, political or religious interests." That is, let the university offer fifty courses in philosophy, history and literature which is dead enough not to be dangerous to vested authority, but let it not take any part in philosophy, history, or literature which is in the making! The application of Thoreau's principles to the injustices of our present political and industrial life would be condemned as disloyally "un-American" in the community where he lived and which is now owned, body and soul, factory and college, by State Street. Thoreau's intellectual kinsmen are not there. For an adequate recognition of the value of Thoreau's challenge to authority one turns to no living New Englander, but to that other solitary and indignant moralist, Tolstoy.

On the right of the individual to withhold his sanction of word and deed from a government by any minority or majority which is engaged in dishonest practices and enforces

brutal laws, the American and the Russian philosopher are mainly in accord. Each says to government: "You may take me and break me because you are physically strong, but willing party to your legalized system of plunder and murder I will not be." The government against which Tolstoy rebelled is melodramatically barbarous, so that liberal minds all over the world find themselves in sympathy with him. It is easy to protest against tyranny on the other side of the planet. Thoreau's government (which is so like the present government of the United States that the change of a word or two, the insertion of modern instances, makes his essay as pertinent as if written yesterday) — Thoreau's government skulks behind the pacific mask of democracy; it deforms children, kills men and ruins women by common consent and not by the cossack forces of a picturesquely tyrannous Czar. The prosperous and so-called cultivated classes who manage for us our industrial, educational, literary and religious affairs, hold up horrified hands at Russia, but naturally have no quarrel with the system of government at home which leaves them in peace and offers them a career of ease. Therefore in the gallery of ideas through which admiring American youth is conducted, Thoreau's portrait of government is discreetly turned to the wall. His nature books, his poetic notes on the seasons, are recommended to an ever-growing number of readers. The flaming eloquence of his social philosophy, the significance, the conclusion of his experiment in individualism, is ignored. We praise Tolstoy, even in cultivated Boston, but we remain unacquainted with our own spiritual liberator.

One difference between Tolstoy and Thoreau is vital, a difference in personal circumstances. Tolstoy was born a landed aristocrat. He struggled in vain to bring the conduct of his life into accord with his beliefs. He desired to be a workman, but could only dabble in manual toil. In spite of his attempt to renounce copyright, his world-famous fictions brought money to his family. Circumstances enmeshed him, and his titanic struggle to extricate himself entangled him more and more, and made him a tragic figure. His life came to an impotent conclusion; only death, as in some Greek tragedy, could restore dignity and moral consistency. Thoreau, on the other hand, was born poor; he remained a bachelor; he earned his living by productive labour; and thus he had the good fortune to be able to practise his philosophy. He was not directly, nor by any economic indirection, dependent for his bread on another man. Tolstoy, an agonized prisoner in a wealth which he thought polluted him, may well have envied the Yankee pencil-whittler and land surveyor, a jack-of-all-trades and master of several, who did his honest day's work beside the common labourers of the world. The leisure which he spent in the company of sages, poets, and prophets, whose peer he was, he earned with his hands. He was spared the humiliation of writing sermons on freedom in time won at the expense of some other man's freedom.

"If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations," he says, "I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations, too."

One other difference between Tolstoy and Thoreau is essential; it springs from that primary difference in their social stations. Tolstoy groaned beneath the agony of a suffering world; he took upon himself the sins of his class. His long cry of pain, which the work of his last twenty years hurls at the dull ears of humanity, is unrelieved except by a sad, half-rationalized Christianity, confessedly unconsoling. He tortured himself with an almost morbid sense of responsibility for evils remote from his private duties, evils which he could not help. Thoreau, on the contrary, enjoyed life. "I came into this world," he says, "not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad." When they put him in jail for refusing on principle to pay his poll tax (he had nothing on which to impose a property tax), he did not make a martyr of himself, but with his mouth slightly awry wrote five dryly humorous pages about "My Prisons," in which legal contrivances are made to look not merely oppressive but ridiculous. He laughs at the jailer and official, his neighbours in their attitudes as policeman and soldier. A man of humour, one might think, would be ashamed to appear on a street in Thoreau's town in blue uniform with a star on his breast, lest Thoreau emerge suddenly from the woods and contemplate the insignia of authority with a faintly acid smile.

Thoreau is not a theorist who argues himself into anarchism by the routes of bookish reasoning. The philosophy of anarchism was not in his lifetime so highly developed, codified and rationalized as it is now; and it is doubtful if Thoreau would have had much patience with its elaborately



systematic arguments in support of an unsystematic conduct of life. "To speak practically and as a citizen," he says, "unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government." He was no selfish opponent of the inconveniences of society. The state might have his money if it used it for useful, or at worst, harmless enterprises, such as building roads. He was willing to conform with any peaceful nonsense or extravagance. "One cannot be too much on his guard . . . lest his action be biased by obstinacy or an undue regard for the opinions of men." He simply asked not to be made accessory to legalized crime. He had no disposition to reform the world, though he joined the abolitionists, like all decent New Englanders of all creeds and political principles. "The government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it."

That was a fair and a practical attitude for a freeman in an agricultural nation like America sixty years ago, where he who had skill to work could get a living somehow. A complexly organized industrial system has since grown up in America, all the good land is occupied, or at least fenced with titles, and to-day even so capable a man as Thoreau would find it difficult to support himself in decency with a half day's work. Thoreau's views fitted his time and his community. Tolstoy, holding the same views, fifty years later, was trying to hark back to conditions that the world of production had outlived even in Russia. What Thoreau, the maker of pencils, would say to a modern pencil-factory

where he, like other workmen, would have to apply for a job, or make no pencils, we can only guess, Yankee-wise. We guess that he would have understood it shrewdly and inspected its machinery with the eye of a born mechanic, and not have protested against it as his epigone, Tolstoy, protested against the advance of modern industry.

With the great changes that have come in the relations between a workman and his tools, some of Thoreau's single-handed individualism has grown obsolete. So far forth as it concerns those practices of government and habits of society which have not appreciably altered or improved, it remains a much-needed word of rebellion. "How does it become a man to behave toward this American government to-day? I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also." For "black slave," which he means, substitute "white slave" or "child labourer" and the sentence stands vividly pertinent to the blessed year 1912. "This people," he said, "must cease to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people." Substitute "Philippines" for "Mexico," and the sentence is part of many an honest man's belief this morning. "The standing army," says Thoreau, "is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican War, the work of comparatively few individuals using the standing army as their tool." Was that written yesterday when, under pretence of preserving

law and order on the Mexican frontier, the financial powers in control of these United States, investors in Mexican "securities," sent an army of freeborn American soldiers to the Rio Grande?

The entire essay on "Civil Disobedience" should be read by us timorous moderns to renerve us in time of abuse. We have, it seems, lost the art of speaking so eloquently and courageously, but we can make the most of a man who spoke for us sixty years ago and whose work it is respectable to quote, for he is an established New England classic.

Thoreau was not concerned primarily with government, because he was so situated that he could turn his back on it and not suffer. In his time an independent man could enjoy liberty of utterance and occupation. Thoreau asked to be let alone, and he was let alone. Non-interference between him and the government was mutual and friendly, except when the tax-collector reached his official hand into the Concord woods and seized that distinguished poll, enumerated as H. D. Thoreau, occupation, surveyor.

Thoreau's work is a long notebook of "surveyor's" jottings, a continuous journal, all autobiographic, some sections of which are assembled into essays.

His first book, "A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers," consists of seven discursive essays on a multitude of subjects. There is rather more reflection upon literature and life in general than narrative of the week's experiences. This insurgent and original man, who lives near the heart of nature, who, like Whitman, regards a woodchuck's hole as a cosmic fact, is a critic of literature, a reader of Eliza-

bethan poets. In a later book, "Cape Cod," he recites the sonorities of Homer on the Yankee sands. In his first book he recites the beauties of nature reclining on the bosom of oriental religion and British poetry.

On Saturday he paddles out on the river. The purling of the water, the echoes of civilization on the banks are vividly realized. But by Sunday morning the little stream has flowed into the vasty deeps of Hindoo and Greek philosophy, and when the Sabbath evening comes we have added nothing to our knowledge of local geography but have listened to one of the very best essays on books. The paragraphs on style form one of the most melodious of all discourses on the art of expression; Thoreau exemplifies the art he is explaining. Whoever enjoys the inconsistency of man may note that for ten pages, in the skilful cadences of a practised "scholar," Thoreau dwells on the merit of the brief word, the eloquence of unlettered men, the farmer's call to his team and other primitive, manly modes of speech. He pays his warmest tribute, however, not to the style of the Concord farmer, but to — Sir Walter Raleigh.

"Sir Walter Raleigh might well be studied, if only for the excellence of his style, for he is remarkable in the midst of so many masters. There is a natural emphasis in his style, like a man's tread, and a breathing space between the sentences, which the best of modern writing does not furnish. His chapters are like English parks, or say rather like a Western forest, where the larger growth keeps down the underwood, and one may ride on horseback through the openings. All the distinguished writers of that period

possess a greater vigour and naturalness than the more modern — for it is allowed to slander our own time — and when we read a quotation from one of them in the midst of a modern author, we seem to have come suddenly upon a greener ground, a greater depth and strength of soil. It is as if a green bough were laid across the page, and we are refreshed as by the sight of fresh grass in midwinter or early spring. You have constantly the warrant of life and experience in what you read. The little that is said is eked out by the implication of the much that was done. . . . The word which is best said came nearest to not being spoken at all, for it is cousin to a deed which the speaker could have better done. Nay, almost it must have taken the place of a deed by some urgent necessity, even by some misfortune, so that the truest writer will be some captive knight, after all. And perhaps the Fates had some such design, when, having stored Raleigh so richly with the substance of life and experience, they made him a fast prisoner, and compelled him to make his words his deeds and transfer to his expression the emphasis and sincerity of his action.”

Beautiful, fluent, and suggestive! But meanwhile what has become of our village anarchist, whom even the tax collector cannot make a captive knight, but who is paddling idly on a New England river — for a week?

On Tuesday a fine description of daybreak from a mountain, an experience not of this week but of another year; on Wednesday a fine sermon on friendship; on Thursday the story of Hannah Dustan and her justifiably murderous exploit among the Indians, accompanied by a discourse on

epic stories and history. On Friday "the wind blew steadily downstream, so that we kept our sails set, and lost not a moment of the forenoon by delays, but from early morning until noon were continually dropping downward. With our hands on the steering paddle, which was thrust deep into the river, or bending to the oar, which indeed we rarely relinquished, we felt each palpitation in the veins of our steed, and each impulse of the wings which drew us above. The current of our thoughts made as sudden bends as the river" — and so he steers into a fine discussion of Ossian. He returns into the current to glide past Tyngsboro and Chelmsford, "holding in one hand half a tart country apple pie" — thence back into a beautiful eddy of thought about poetry, and the week is ended — a leisurely week covering ages of human thought.\*

Of this interesting book, full of exquisite reflections and of as deep wisdom as ever came out of the universe by way of Concord, the author sold two hundred copies; the rest he took back from the printer and stored in a garret, a transaction which he records with unresentful dry humour.

His next book, the only other which he lived to see in print, is "Walden," his masterpiece, a greater book than the "Week," of the same tone and texture, but informed by a more explicit unifying philosophy of life. It records his actual experiment in individualism. It is alive with the reality of daily doings and is rounded to a higher reality, to one man's

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\*Alcott said that this book was "Virgil, White of Selbourne and Izaak Walton and Yankee settler all in one." This is intended as high praise and does express the varied wealth of the book. But Alcott could not turn a lofty intention into words without getting something wrong. There is about as much of Virgil in Thoreau as there is of Seneca!



complete view of the life worth living and the destiny of the race. Emerson, paying his frugal way by lecturing and writing, makes many observations about society and solitude, the place of the individual in nature, but he lives among men and does not know from experience the effect of abiding sole and self-dependent in the midst of an unpopulated wood. Thoreau, investigator and surveyor, tries solitude for two years, makes nature a laboratory, and brings back the record of his experiment. "Walden" is one of those whole, profound books in which the best of an author is distilled. In his two years by the pond Thoreau observed sharply what he could do with nature and what nature did to him; he pondered at leisure over what it all meant and made, not a collection of random jottings, but a summarized report.

Thoreau does not, as some people imagine, argue the case for the wilderness as against the town; on the contrary he loves best the cultivated land with people on it. He merely uses the wilderness to try himself in; he goes where the nature ingredients are unmixed with other things, as an experimenter in dietetics isolates his "food-squad" to increase human knowledge, not to please their palates. Thoreau tells what he lived for, how he lived, and thereby throws light on what humanity lives for. His attitude is neither modest nor magisterial; it is sometimes rather disdainful, his reflections on the life that his neighbours lead are often coolly contemptuous. But for the most part he is setting forth *his* life and makes *his* conclusions clear, without urging them upon the reader's acceptance. He probes into the economies of an unthinking prosperity like other radical

philosophers; but whereas the satiric dissections of a Carlyle leave the world a ruin and the pieces not worth picking up, Thoreau builds a courageous and cheerfully remodelled life, practical for him at least, and though not to be foisted on the world like a reformer's nostrum, valuable to any neighbour who will read intelligently. "So I lived," he seems to say; "so I believed; so I found out and realized *my* sense of life. Take it or leave it. My experience taught me that to build a fine house to live in is less important than to build a good man to live in it. If that is not a practical ideal, please examine my bean account and see if by your own dull bread-winning, cake-stealing standards of life, I did not prove myself a competent husbandman."

Thoreau does not turn his back on responsibilities nor flaunt his idleness in the sweaty face of humanity; he is a conscientiously busy man, busy about his life and needs, and not unmindful of the needs of others; he holds his head up honestly, the equal of the thoughtless driven toiler, and is much his superior in the satisfaction of man's need for high meditation. The philosophy of "Walden" is near to the selfish self-culture of the unsocial Greek. States cannot be built on it any more than they can be built on Epictetus or on Plato's "Republic," but like them Thoreau stimulates the individual to examine himself and see where he stands in the midst of the solar system, to inquire what his activities amount to and what is the motive of them.

There is more in "Walden" than philosophy and unsocial experiment in the business of making a living. It is full of the poetry of the open world, an "hypaethral" book, un-

roofed to the skies. The birds fly and sing and the trees bud. Sometimes they have their technical names, for Thoreau is too clever to know less about a thing he sees than does some commonplace naturalist of the schools; but a naturalist he avowedly is not. He says in his Journal that the Secretary of the Association for the Advancement of Science asked him to fill in the blanks of a circular letter by way of answering certain questions, "among which the most important one was, what branch of science I was especially interested in. . . . I felt that it would be to make myself a laughing stock of the scientific community to describe to them that branch of science which especially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. . . . How absurd that though I probably stand as near to Nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most, yet a true account of my relation to Nature should excite their ridicule only." Again he writes in the Journal: "Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but with only the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her. To look at her is as fatal as to look at the head of Medusa. It turns the man of science to stone." Thoreau is, as he prayed to be, a "hunter of the beautiful." He is in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field are at peace with him. He is a better naturalist than most men of literary imagination, and he has more imagination than most naturalists.

There are two kinds of mystics. One shrouds himself in his cloudy dreams, mistaking his murky vision for fact.

The other, open-eyed and cheerful amid the sunlit world, feels himself near the heart of living things. The one is a theologian; the other is a poet. For all his interest in the hazier transcendentalists and his admiration for the stupendous absurdities of Swedenborg, Thoreau is less near to the religious mystic than to the nature poet of all times, and especially to Wordsworth. Thoreau's spirit is that of a poet, though his verses are not good, for he was wanting in "the decisive gift of lyrical expression," as Emerson says of Plato and might have said of himself. Like his contemporaries, Thoreau misreads Nature as a collection of moral lessons, but he is not blind to her naked loveliness, and he finds her lessons not austere, but consoling. "Not by constraint or severity shall you have access to true wisdom, but by abandonment and childlike mirthfulness. If you would know aught, be gay before it."

Mystic and transcendentalist, he is not a foggy-minded dreamer with his head lost in vacant unrealities. He lived not ascetically, but heartily, and could have said on his deathbed like Hazlitt that he had had a happy life. He did not shrink from facts like some other poets who have fled stricken to the shadowy woods. He looked upon things courageously. But he had his private criteria of what was worth looking at. His quarrel with politicians is characteristic. He is contemptuous of them, not because they are engaged in sordid matters, not because they are "practical" (the sentimentalist's charge against them), but because they are not earnestly busy at the tasks they pretend to engage in. They are poor politicians. "They who have been bred

in the school of politics fail now and always to face the facts," he says.

In his wonderful essay, "Life Without Principle," he says: "I have often been surprised when one has with confidence proposed to me, a grown man, to embark in some enterprise of his, as if I had absolutely nothing to do, my life having been a complete failure hitherto. . . . No, no! I am not without employment at this stage of the voyage. To tell the truth, I saw an advertisement for able-bodied seamen, when I was a boy, sauntering in my native port, and as soon as I came of age, I embarked." So he sailed, a clear-eyed steersman, content and confident as in the canoe which he paddled on Concord River, to that morrow — the concluding words of "Walden"— "which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning-star."

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Henry David Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts, July 12, 1817, and died there May 6, 1862. He graduated at Harvard in 1837; in those days there was a fee of five dollars for the diploma, and Thoreau, who had an unusually good sense of values, refused to pay the price of the parchment. He spent the rest of his life in and about Concord, whence he made excursions to Cape Cod, Maine, New Hampshire, Canada. He supported himself by teaching school, making lead-pencils, surveying and farming. He gave a few lectures and published two books. Emerson

expresses his life in compact negations: "He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the state; he ate no flesh; he drank no wine; he never knew the use of tobacco; and though a naturalist he used neither gun nor rod." It should be added that he did not always live alone, for he lived with Emerson a little while, paying his board by his labour. Emerson edited four of his posthumous volumes.

His works are: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, 1849; *Walden*, 1854; *Excursions*, 1863; *The Maine Woods*, 1864; *Cape Cod*, 1865; *Letters*, 1865; *A Yankee in Canada*, 1866; *Early Spring in Massachusetts*, 1881; *Summer*, 1884; *Winter*, 1887; *Autumn*, 1892; *Miscellanies*, 1893; *Journals*, edited by Bradford Torrey, 1906.

The life of Thoreau is written in his journals and letters with the admirable introductions by his friends, Emerson and Mr. F. B. Sanborn. The Life by his other friend, W. E. Channing, called "Thoreau: Poet-Naturalist," is important but fatuous. A good English biography is that by H. A. Page (Dr. Alexander Japp), "Thoreau: His Life and Aim." Stevenson's essay in "Familiar Studies of Men and Books" is good Stevenson but poor Thoreau; and the paragraphs about the essay in the preface are just as good Stevenson but still worse Thoreau. Lowell's Essay is the work of an extraordinarily brilliant snob. See also the Life by H. S. Salt, and the Life by F. B. Sanborn in *American Men of Letters*.



## CHAPTER XI

### LOWELL

There is Lowell, who's striving Parnassus to climb  
With a whole bale of *isms* tied together with rhyme;  
He might get on alone, spite of brambles and boulders,  
But he can't with that bundle he has on his shoulders;  
The top of the hill he will ne'er come nigh reaching  
Till he learns the distinction 'twixt singing and preaching;  
His lyre has some chords that would ring pretty well,  
But he'd rather by half make a drum of the shell,  
And rattle away till he's old as Methusalem,  
At the head of a march to the last new Jerusalem.

IN THIS lampoon of himself in the clattering "Fable for Critics," Lowell confesses one of his defects, and he exhibits another — his verbal carelessness and lack of metrical finesse. He also displays very attractive virtues, genial willingness to apply his critical candour to his own talents, and freedom from the more solemn sort of literary pose. He began his career with some slight verses, sincere in thought and not unskilful, though technically stiff and hasty with the haste that betrays itself. He was moved, at least in his youth, by noble enthusiasms; he studied the poets ancient and modern with unfeigned ardour; he became a competent, even acute, analyst of the technique of poetry; his impulse to utter his feelings in song did not abate with

youth but continued all his life. Yet he wrote no perfect poem in classic English (if classic is the word to discriminate what is not in dialect); no poem of his sings itself, flies on its own wings or, to use its own words, "maintains itself by virtue of a happy coalescence of matter and style." The old way of expressing his failure is to say that he was not a born poet, which explains nothing but suggests what is wanting in the verse of a man who had most of the namable abilities and motives that make a poet. Life-long devotion to poetry, an unusually wide acquaintance with the resources of language, elevated thoughts and an intense desire to say them, all are his; the music simply does not happen. It is not the burden of his *isms* alone that keeps him on the lower paths of Parnassus. Milton, Coleridge, Shelley were heavily laden with intellectual theses. The glorious company of pre-Raphaelites often set up a lecture-stand in their aerie and engage in a bewildering babel of disputes on social, political and æsthetic problems. Poets are thinkers and are not inferior to their prosaic brothers in their love of argument or the zeal with which they hug their opinions. A true poet can carry any intellectual burden and not be hindered by it. Lowell had no quality, no interest, no occupation, chosen or enforced, which might not be of real service to a poet; no pack of fardels bound him to earth. His disability was not a positive but a negative thing.

He was profoundly ambitious; he took his work seriously and felt deeply what he had to say. In an early poem, "An Incident in a Railroad Car," he describes the effect of Burns on simple men. The poem rings true; it is free

from the sentimentalism of Bret Harte's poem on a similar subject, "Dickens in Camp."

But better far it is to speak  
One simple word, which now and then  
Shall waken their free nature in the weak  
And friendless sons of men.

To write some earnest verse or line,  
Which seeking not the praise of art,  
Shall make a clearer faith and manhood shine  
In the untutored heart.

This is an excellent ideal, sincerely if not poetically said. It expresses what Whittier and Longfellow did in some measure accomplish. Lowell does not reach the untutored heart, nor does he satisfy readers whose private anthology is gathered from three centuries of English poetry. He did enjoy a degree of popularity that any poet might be proud of. His stirring piece, "The Present Crisis," was quoted by the liberal preachers and orators of the day; its fluent declamation adapts it to the impassioned eloquence of exhorters striving to rouse multitudes. "The Vision of Sir Launfal" became a "household" poem, and is still, perhaps not wisely, prescribed for reading in American secondary schools. The best of all his verse, except that in dialect, is the passage about Lincoln in the "Commemoration Ode"; it is so good that it ought to be great, but the light fades from it when it is put beside Whitman's elegies. The Ode was written in a rush of inspiration which left Lowell exhausted, a true case of the poet's pouring his heart's blood

(that is, his nervous energy) into his work. But it leaves at least one reader, who is eager to like it, almost cold. The metaphors shine, but do not glow. Lowell's strong, capricious intellect seems not to have guided firmly the flow of his emotion but to have intercepted it and diluted it with rhetoric and conceits. Some of his other high-pitched and sober verse, intended to be in the grand style and strong with the very effort to be poetry, is confused and perplexing. The metaphors are manufactured and inserted; they are not of one substance with the thought. "Turner's Old Téméraire," which should have been a fine poem, ends·

This shall the pleased eyes of our children see;  
 For this the stars of God long even as we;  
 Earth listens for his wings; the Fates  
 Expectant lean; Faith cross-propt waits,  
 And the tired waves of Thought's insurgent sea.

That verse, with its teeth-gritting "Faith cross-propt waits," is like the unpoetic parts of Browning, the work of a capable intellect, pushing the words into place with great power, far above the capacity of the mere mediocre versifier, but not making poetry. The inevitable poem is so good that it cannot be made essentially better; it is great with its defects like Francis Thompson's unrevised "In No Strange Land." It is so good that it does not remind one of another poem which in its kind surpasses it. It becomes indispensable to the lover of poetry who once reads it, and nothing else will take its place. The themes of Lowell's poems in pure English are all sung better by some other

poet. In "Appledore," one cannot hear the sea as one hears it in Swinburne and Whitman. "The Washers of the Shroud" does not thrill with the ominous voice of War. It is intellectually interesting, and has, like much of Lowell's verse, every virtue but *the* virtue. "Hunger and Cold" is startling and virile, especially the beginning; it diminishes into mere stanza-making and you can hear the pen scratch. "Bibliolatres" has a good thought in it, a protest of the modern spirit against letter-bound creeds.

Slowly the Bible of the race is writ,  
And not on paper leaves nor leaves of stone;  
Each age, each kindred, adds a verse to it,  
Texts of despair or hope, of joy or moan.  
While swings the sea, while mists the mountain shroud,  
While thunder's surges burst on cliffs of cloud,  
Still at the prophets' feet the nations sit.

Such pregnant verses have value. They rise eminent in the solid prose of life, but do not detach from it and become poetry.

"Talent," says Lowell, "is that which is in a man's power; genius is that in whose power he is." This epigram belongs to a time when philosophic critics were wrestling with definitions, trying to mark the exact boundaries of talent and genius, wit and humour, imagination and fancy. It is a kind of philosophizing that we seem to have abandoned, partly because the men of the early nineteenth century handed down to us as a result of their labours a precise critical vocabulary, and partly because they left the disputes

inconclusive and so taught us that they cannot be settled. That epigram is too sharp to be true, but it has truth in it, and it is applicable to Lowell's verse. He had poetic talent; the genius of poetry did not possess him.

Lowell says that "a wise scepticism is the first attribute of a good critic." The scepticism which, with an honest willingness to be persuaded that Lowell is a poet, comes off still shaking its head, may not be wise and the critic may not be a good critic. But it is better than unguine praise; and high praise it is impossible to give to the verse that Lowell wrote in traditional literary English. There is, however, one portion of his poetry which completely overcomes scepticism and for which nothing but praise can be spoken — "The Biglow Papers." They have no rivals. Custom has not staled them. Occasional poems, they have wings that lift them above occasion to immortality. In them Lowell is possessed by his genius, by a genius that never visited any one else in the same shape. The dialect, artificial from the point of view of a philological naturalist, becomes Lowell's native speech. In it he can say anything, grotesque, scornful, flippant, deeply comic, pathetic, gay, blithely lyrical, melancholy. He is much more at ease in it than in the language of his library. "The Courtin'" is his best poem, and far from being "homely," it is as graceful as a "hahnsome" girl in a gingham apron. In "The Biglow Papers" all Lowell's metrical gymnastics, his jovial, crackling wit, his passionate, manly convictions are brought into full play. He is dead in earnest and yet having a "good time."



So thoroughly is Lowell's whole self embodied in this form that having made the Mexican War series, he can, after fifteen years, under the impulse of the Civil War, resume the vernacular lyre, and — a rare thing — make the sequel better than its predecessor.

A New Englander can read "The Biglow Papers" aloud with hardly more consciousness that he is reading a dialect than an educated Scotsman (probably) feels in reading Burns. To say that it is a dialect that no people ever spoke is merely to say that New Englanders do not talk in verse. Neither would a Scotch farmer before Burns have said, "A woe-worn ghaist I hameward glide"; for that is the idiom not of speech, but of literature reshaping a dialect. Biglow's turn of phrase falls familiar on the ear of one who knows New England farmers — farmers that did leave "the ax an' saw," "the anvil an' the plow," who believe that the best way to settle "is to settle an' not jaw" — and then argue an hour to prove it. Lowell's enthusiasm for the dialect and his delight in the Yankee mixture of common sense and mystic nearness to God find expression in the essay which prefaces the collected works of Mr. Biglow and Parson Wilbur. Can the literature of philology show such a truly literary and genuinely philological essay as Lowell's? He knows the subject as a scholar, and he feels it as a poet. The dialect is his most effective literary idiom; in it he can "let himself go," and he is freed from the weight of his bookishness.

Contrast his expression in classic English and in Biglow's dialect of ideas nearly akin, The loss of his children moved

him to write several poems, "She Came and Went," "The Changeling," and "The First Snowfall." He also wrote some verses on the death of a friend's child, and on the death of Agassiz. Lowell was too honest to write of his private emotions merely for the sake of making verses. Yet none of these poems is affecting in the way they intend to be. Indeed one dislikes to quote them, even to prove a point, because they produce a feeling of discomfort, of regret that a strong man, tragically meaning what he tries to say, should speak like a feeble sentimentalist.

I had a little daughter  
And she was given to me  
To lead me gently backward  
To the Heavenly Father's knee.

After the War, in which Lowell lost three nephews, Hosea Biglow sings his joy at the coming of peace and his sorrow for dead soldiers.

Rat-tat-tattle thru the street  
I hear the drummers makin' riot,  
An' I set thinkin' o' the feet  
Thet follered once an' now are quiet, —  
White feet ez snowdrops innercent,  
Thet never knowed the paths o' Satan,  
Whose comin' step ther' 's ears thet won't,  
No, not lifelong, leave off awaitin'.

Why, hain't I held 'em on my knee?  
Didn't I love to see 'em growin',  
Three likely lads ez wal could be,  
Hahnsome an' brave an' not tu knowin'?

I set an' look into the blaze  
 Whose natur', jes' like theirn, keeps climbin',  
 Ez long 'z it lives, in shinin' ways,  
 An' half despise myself for rhymin'.

Wut's words to them whose faith an' truth  
 On War's red techstone rang true metal,  
 Who ventered life an' love an' youth  
 For the gret prize o' death in battle? —  
 To him who, deadly hurt, agen  
 Flashed on afore the charge's thunder,  
 Tippin' with fire the bolt of men  
 Thet rived the Rebel line asunder?

'Tain't right to hev the young go fust,  
 All throbbin' full o' gifts an' graces,  
 Leavin' life's paupers dry ez dust  
 To try an' make b'lieve fill their places:  
 Nothin' but tells us wut we miss,  
 Ther' 's gaps our lives can't never fay in,  
 An' *thet* world seems so fur from this  
 Lef' for us loafers to grow gray in!

In the lighter, sharper moods of satire "The Biglow Papers" are so good that they are all quotable. The Peace Society might open offices next to our recruiting stations (with their mendacious posters of splendidly tailored officers) and distribute to inquiring youth the first effusion of Mr. Biglow:

Thrash away, you'll *hev* to rattle  
 On them kittle-drums o' yourn, —  
 'Taint a knowin' kind o' cattle  
 Thet is ketched with mouldy corn;

Put in stiff, you fifer feller,  
 Let folks see how spry you be, —  
 Guess you'll toot till you are yellor  
 'Fore you git ahoid o' me!

Thet air flag's a leetle rotten,  
 Hope it ain't your Sunday best; —  
 Fact! it takes a sight o' cotton  
 To stuff out a soger's chest:  
 Sence we farmers hev to pay fer't,  
 Ef you must wear humps like these,  
 S'posin' you should try salt hay fer't,  
 It would du ez slick ez grease.

To our cowardly newspapers, which do not dare fight, or even mention, injustices at their own doors, because the owners of the papers or their financial allies make money out of the injustices, "The Pious Editor's Creed" is recommended.

I du believe in Freedom's cause,  
 Ez fur away ez Payris is;  
 I love to see her stick her claws  
 In them infarnal Phayrisees;  
 It's wal enough agin a king  
 To dror resolves an' triggers, —  
 But libbaty's a kind o' thing  
 Thet don't agree with niggers.

. . . . .

I du believe in special ways  
 O' prayin' an' convartin';  
 The bread comes back in many days,  
 An' buttered, tu, fer sartin;

I mean in preyin' till one busts  
 On wut the party chooses,  
 An' in convartin' public trusts  
 To very privit uses.

. . . . .  
 I du believe in bein' this  
 Or thet, ez it may happen  
 One way or t' other hendiest is  
 To ketch the people nappin';  
 It ain't by princerples nor men  
 My prudent course is steadied, —  
 I scent which pays the best, an' then  
 Go into it baldheaded.

“Sunthin’ in the Pastoral Line” is a fine nature poem;  
 the coming of spring is as fresh as Chaucer’s April

Gladness on wings, the bobolink, is here;  
 Half hid in tip-top apple-blooms he swings,  
 Or climbs against the breeze with quiverin’ wings,  
 Or givin’ way to ’t in a mock despair,  
 Runs down, a brook o’ laughter, thru the air.

If Lowell, with his full, hearty sense of life and many gifts, did not write any book (except “The Biglow Papers”) which takes its place surely among the classics, did he phrase the reason himself in these lines?

Jes’ so with poets: wut they’ve airly read  
 Gits kind o’ worked into their heart an’ head,  
 So’s they can’t seem to write but jest on sheers  
 With furrin countries or played-out ideers,  
 Nor hev a feelin’, ef it doosn’t smack  
 O’ wut some critter chose to feel ’way back.

Did not Lowell read too much? Did not his vigorous mind become smothered in more traditional ideas than it could assimilate and master? As he grows older he becomes distrustful of life. He does not lead, but follows, and sceptically, timidly opposes the newer movements, just as the older ideas which his youth welcomed were opposed by men whom he then, as a hot radical, despised. His mind seems to fill up too quickly and have no room left for anything that happened after the Civil War. He is afraid of evolution, clinging with a perverse sentimentality to pretty beliefs that he has really outgrown. In waxing rigid with age he is not unlike other men; many of his contemporaries seem to have been stunned, tired out, by the issues of the Civil War, unable to take up thoughts not already in their blood. By the time he is fifty, all Lowell's interest is in ideas that have already ripened and partly decayed. And the reason, with him, over and above the conservatism natural to graying maturity, is that he fed himself too richly on things in old books.

His biography portrays him hurrying home from lectures, half ironically congratulating himself for having overcome his indolence and "done a day's work," then incontinently sinking into his armchair and reading till midnight. He had a capacious and hospitable mind. He boasted that in 1860 he was one of the few cultivated Bostonians who appreciated Lincoln and foresaw his emerging greatness. Twenty years later he is looking at life with the shrug of the mere literary man; he has degenerated into a polite conservative statesman, intelligent, honest, but no longer



alive to the best and bravest ideas of the life about him. He buried himself in the past. His mind was crammed with literature, that is, with the expressions of outworn states of society, and even his large nature had no room for any thing fresh from life. Literature is a food and a stimulant up to a certain point. Beyond that it becomes a drug. By thirty-five or forty a creative literary intellect should have taken its necessary nutriment from the classics; after that much reading maketh not a full man, but a library man. Lowell's essay on Lincoln, written in 1864, when people needed to be told what we know now but few knew then, is a greater contribution to literature, to the life of humanity, than essays on Dante and Chaucer. One is jealous in behalf of real literature at the surrender of such a splendid mind as Lowell's to the inferior work, the secondary work, of studying books. That work, which is necessary and requires talent, can be well enough done by men who could not write "The Biglow Papers" or the essay on Lincoln. Moreover, less reading, the study of fewer men, would not have hurt his bookish essays, but might have improved them. He quotes too much directly and indirectly; transfers to his pages in too great abundance, and to the disturbance of order, the marked passages in his beloved library.

Lowell's submersion in books was, to be sure, not motivated entirely by the sin of indolence and willingness to let other men determine the course of his thought; he was devoted to great thinkers, and his devotion is more than justified by the work he did as a teacher and critic. In company with Longfellow, Emerson, and others of the New England Illumi-

nati, he introduced modern literature into a cultivated society that had hitherto depended wholly on the ancient classics — the classics parsed and parsonified, to put it in a Lowellian manner. His address delivered before the Modern Language Association is a sort of intellectual autobiography, a confession of faith and *apologia pro vita sua*. The man who objected to the stuffed nightingales and English Aprils in American poetry was the man who swamped himself and others in floods of European literature. It was a true service, which we might easily underestimate to-day when the literature of every country is exported to every other as fast as it comes from the press. When Lowell opened the old French Romances he found virgin pages; the gilt and marbling on the tops of the books stuck the leaves together. With his characteristic skill in finding just the right quotation to express it, he says:

I was the first who ever burst  
Into that silent sea.

He was a discoverer, and his critical essays tingle with the fervour of discovery. To-day our poor professors are driven to despair trying to keep up with the "literature" of their subjects, which is not literature at all; and they look at you wistfully, enviously, if you happen to talk about some great modern things which they, teachers of literature, have not time for! Lowell made his reading fruitful for other men. Therefore he is a true critic. He did his work at a time when it was greatly needed. Yet one cannot help thinking that he was reading other men's work when

he ought to have been rewriting his own, that another poem as good as "The Courtin'," and better versions of many of his other poems got lost in the library where there was so much French Romance and Dante and Chaucer. One poem is worth fifty criticisms. Arnold's lovely poem, "The Buried Life," is more precious than all his talks about the Function of Criticism and Hellenism.

Lowell's position was unique. He was the sole authentic literary advocate and discoverer in New England and had no competitors near his throne. Longfellow, also a discoverer and advocate, did not write criticisms. Lowell's autocratic privileges fostered the merits of his prose, its humanity, audacity, colloquial ease; and it also aggravated his defects, his amateurish, capricious irresponsibility, which his finer-tempered friend, Norton, and his more learned friend, Child, could not chasten, if they ever tried to. He could give his judgments without any feeling that there was a law library at his back or any other competent lawyer in the court room. On the whole this condition was rather for than against the kind of excellence of which he was capable; he needed elbow room and a wilful laxity of method. Circumstances encouraged him to be an amateur in the best sense of the word, reading for fun, like Lamb, not worried about the duty of "getting up his subject," and so never losing in the judgment seat the reader's attitude toward books. His address to the Modern Language Association, once an encouragement, is now a rebuke to the college professor of comparative literature, a subject which has become all comparison and no literature, if I

may judge by such living professors as I have listened to or read.

"If I did not rejoice," says Lowell, "in the wonderful advance made in the comparative philology of the modern languages, I should not have the face to be standing here. But neither should I, if I shrank from saying what I believed to be the truth, whether here or elsewhere. I think that the purely linguistic side in the teaching of them seems in the way to get more than its fitting share. I insist only that in our college courses this should be a separate study, and that, good as it is in itself, it should, in the scheme of general instruction, be restrained to its own function as the guide to something better. And that something better is Literature. Let us rescue ourselves from what Milton calls 'these grammatic flats and shallows.' The blossoms of language have certainly as much value as its roots; for if the roots secrete food and thereby transmit life to the plant, yet the joyous consummation of that life is in the blossoms, which alone bear the seeds that distribute and renew it in other growths. Exercise is good for the muscles of mind and to keep it well in hand for work, but the true end of Culture is to give it play, a thing quite as needful."

As an amateur enjoying himself in a wide range of literature, Lowell sometimes misjudges. Many commonplace instructors in English could point out where he was wrong, but they are wrong, too, and are not interesting. As Mr. Ambrose Bierce said of one of them, "Professor Matthews is nothing if not accurate, and he is not accurate." What difference does it make if Lowell is wrong in his contention

about Chaucer's nine-syllable line? The significant thing is that no other American professor, not even Child with all his knowledge, has written an essay on Chaucer which like Lowell's is itself literature.

Lowell illuminates even where he misjudges and therein he differs from critics who write with such modified judgments and well-tempered compensations that they elaborately kill their discourses. Lowell's essay on Thoreau is unjust. But even one who regards Thoreau as very great will find himself unable to improve upon Lowell's praises on the last atoning page. "There are sentences of his as perfect as anything in the language, and thoughts as clearly crystallized; his metaphors and images are always fresh from the soil; he had watched Nature like a detective who is to go upon the stand; as we read him, it seems as if all-out-of-doors had kept a diary and become its own Montaigne; we look at the landscape as in a Claude Lorraine glass; compared with his, all other books of similar aim, even White's 'Selborne,' seem dry as a country clergyman's meteorological journal in an old almanac. He belongs with Donne and Browne and Novalis; if not with the originally creative men, with the scarcely smaller class who are peculiar, and whose leaves shed their invisible thought seeds like ferns."

The opening pages of the same essay are an acid caricature of a whole era of thought and are good reading if not taken too seriously. They are written by a man who is more than a literary critic, who is a satirist of human nature, the same satirist who wrote the double-edged commentaries

of Hosea's friend, the Rev. Homer Wilbur. Lowell's essay on Carlyle measures exactly the place in nineteenth-century thought that now, looking back, we can see Carlyle had come to at that time. If some readers of modern poetry have fallen out with Pope, Lowell's essay will incite them to read Pope again and learn his unique excellence. The paper "On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners" is ultimate criticism of all books by all people, especially Englishmen, on countries where the writers do not live.

Lowell has the true essayist's inability to stick to his subject. Apropos of a book or a writer he talks of anything that happens to be suggested to him. This quality makes him an excellent letter-writer and as his friends report him, a delightful talker, natural king in the easy-chair throne. Some formalistic critics, who seem to think that the whole universe of literature depends on their saying just the right thing, object too strongly to Lowell's habit of kicking up his heels in the midst of a fine passage. Lamb, the greatest of critics, does the same thing. It comes from irrepressible high spirits, delight in life, which is a good thing in literature, and is correspondingly good in the criticism of literature. No other writer about books after Lamb and Hazlitt is more continuously readable than Lowell. His very prejudices are entertaining; they lead him to some bold hard hitting which, we are told, passed out of good society with the days of Macaulay and Poe; perhaps that is the reason some of us read Macaulay and Poe in preference to critics of finer amenity. Lowell always talks like an honest man, never like a literary poseur. His affectations are not really affec-



tations, for he expects you to know what he is doing, to play-act with him in a momentary interruption before he goes on again with the lesson in hand. He tells what books mean to him, not what they ought to mean to him because some other critic has said so. He is capable of fine eloquence, and he has a habit of bringing his eloquence quickly down by whimsical change of mood. He has variety of style because he has variety of feelings. The irregularities of his prose are due not wholly to carelessness, but partly to exuberance and to the impulsive pursuit of his idea.

All Lowell's prose is good to read. One volume of it is indispensable to an American, the "Political Essays." We can read somebody else's essays on Gray and Keats, but no one of the time has left us a better volume of its kind than Lowell's papers on political affairs. In 1888 when he collected them he wrote:

"In looking at them again after so long an interval (for the latest of them is more than twenty years old) it gratifies me to find so little to regret in their tone, and that I was able to keep my head fairly clear of passion when my heart was at boiling point."

Like Mazzini and Phillips, Lowell preaches God and the People. Later he clung to God but drew away from the people. The foolish charge of Anglomania once brought against him was a poor return for his adequate services in Spain and England, which he gave as a matter of conscience when he would rather have been back in his library. But that charge is merely a wrong way of putting what is true, that he had outlived his democracy. He saw, as he

believed, that the country was falling away from the ideals of Lincoln, and when he caricatured Wendell Phillips he did not see that he was taking a place analogous to that of cultivated gentlemen of an earlier time who wanted slavery let alone. The hot heart and cool head that enabled him to see Lincoln in 1864 and served him in his fine dignified polemic on the Seward-Johnson reaction, ceased to work together. It was a different man who in 1886 wrote "The Progress of the World," which is a demonstration that one man in the world had ceased to progress. He was no longer interested in the march toward any "New Jerusalem." Never again in his last quarter century was he so strong, so truly the Lowell of "The Biglow Papers," as when he wrote in 1868:

"We have only to be unswervingly faithful to what is the true America of our hope and belief, and whatever is American will rise from one end of the country to the other instinctively to our side, with more than ample means of present succour and of final triumph. It is only by being loyal and helpful to Truth that men learn at last how loyal and helpful she can be to them."

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

James Russell Lowell was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, February 22, 1819; he died there August 12, 1891. He graduated from Harvard in 1838. For a while he studied law. In 1844 he married Maria White; she died in 1853. He spent the years 1851-2, 1855 and 1856 in Europe. In 1857 he succeeded Longfellow as Smith Professor of Litera-

ture in Harvard College, and held the chair for fifteen years. He married his second wife, Frances Dunlap, in 1857. He was the first editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and in 1862 he became co-editor with Charles Eliot Norton of the *North American Review*. He was appointed minister to Spain in 1887 and was transferred to England in 1880. He was relieved of political duty in 1885 when Cleveland became president.

His principal works are: Poems, 1844, 1848; Conversations on Some of the Old Poets, 1845; The Biglow Papers, First Series, 1848; A Fable for Critics, 1848; Fireside Travels, 1864; Commemoration Ode, 1865; The Biglow Papers, Second Series, 1866; Under the Willows, 1869; The Cathedral 1869; Among My Books, 1870, 1876; My Study Windows, 1871; Three Memorial Poems, 1876; Democracy and Other Addresses, 1886; Heartsease and Rue, 1888; Political Essays, 1888; Latest Literary Essays and Addresses, 1891; The Old English Dramatists, 1892; Letters (edited by C. E. Norton), 1893.

The Life of Lowell by Mr. Ferris Greenslet is authentic. "Recollections and Appreciations" by Francis H. Underwood and "James Russell Lowell and His Friends" by Dr. E. E. Hale are delightful and personal. A good essay is that by Mr. Henry James in "Essays in London."

## CHAPTER XII

### WHITMAN

The singers are welcomed, understood, appear often enough, but rare has the day been, likewise the spot, of the birth of the maker of poems, the Answerer.

Rhymes and rhymers pass away, poems distilled from poems pass away,

The swarms of reflectors and the polite pass, and leave ashes, Admirers, importers, obedient persons, make but the soil of literature,

America justifies itself, give it time, no disguise can deceive it or conceal from it, it is impassive enough,

Only the likes of itself will advance to meet it,

If its poets appear it will in due time advance to meet them, there is no fear of mistake

(The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it).

ONLY one day in the century of American literature is marked by the birth of a "maker of poems, an Answerer"—the day when Whitman was born. The history of Whitman, of his poetry and of the effect it has had on many kinds of men, is the history of the slow advance of democracy to meet its poets—or one of its poets, for there shall be many. When "Leaves of Grass" appeared in 1855, it was welcomed by a few great liberal spirits, notably by Emerson. Later Whitman

was hailed by some English men of letters, including several of the young pre-Raphaelite group, who were at once so daringly modern and so yearningly curious of the middle ages. Conventional "teachers" of literature, professional book reviewers, whom Whitman openly challenged with his magnificent kindly scorn, quite naturally returned fire, and inevitably betrayed their impotence. A group of young Americans, then at the beginning of careers which have since made their names known, such as Mr. John Burroughs and Mr. Horace Traubel, formed a Whitman cult, whose devotion and nobility of thought more than atone for such partisan over-emphasis as is characteristic of all militant discipleships. A generation of British poets and radical thinkers, who were young when "Leaves of Grass" was new, for instance W. E. Henley and Edward Carpenter, have felt Whitman's influence and been strengthened by it in true self-expression. The present generation of young readers of poetry contains men who no more doubt that Whitman is the greatest poetic voice of nature and liberty since Wordsworth and Shelley than they doubt that Lincoln was the greatest statesman.

Meanwhile the great public, common humanity, the "average man" whom Whitman loved and knew better than did Wordsworth or Shelley or any other poet, seems to deny its own prophet. That is, the multitude do not read him, thereby negatively attesting that they hold him the equal of Dante and Milton, whom also they do not read. "I bestow upon any man or woman," says Whitman, "the entrance to all the gifts of the uni-

verse." But many men and women do not accept his generosity.

The indifference of democracy to its greatest poet seems a paradox, but the indifference does not exist. America is not a democracy; it is a vast bourgeoisie; the democracy which Whitman celebrates has not arrived on the earth. The men and women he saw and loved were the material of which he believed a democracy is some day to be born. So that when professors, deaf and blind to the life about them and especially to "democracy," which is as yet felt only by a minority, say that the ideals of the people are contrary to Whitman's ideals of the people, they are superficially right. The ideals of the people are bourgeois ideals inculcated by most of the "savants" in obedience to the economic powers that endow and dominate the universities. The democratic ideal, the ideal of Shelley, of Mazzini, of young Wagner, of Lincoln (corroborative passages are abundant in the writings of these apparently dissimilar men) has not yet reached the majority of the people. The middle-class thinkers and teachers who manage our schools and our press are undemocratic and ignorant. It is true, as Professor George Santayana says, that "Whitman failed radically in his dearest ambition," if his dearest ambition was to be read by the millions; but Whitman, who was no fool, did not expect in his lifetime to be read by a million people. Moreover, to say, as Professor Santayana says, that "he can never be the poet of the people" is a prophecy, which, since one man has as much right as another to guess at the future, can be met with the contrary prophecy that Whitman will be



one of the poets of the people when, and not until, democracy dominates this world; then the people will "advance to meet him; there is no fear of mistake." To say that democracy did not accept him is like saying that Nature did not buy copies of Wordsworth's poems or that the inhabitants of the Infernal areas do not sit about reading Dante. Shelley and Morris, the greatest of all English poets of liberty, are not in the coat pockets of the workmen whose emancipation they chanted. The reviews of the year 1820 show that the gross-minded respectable persons of Shelley's time gave him the same reception which Literary and Academic Authority accorded to Whitman, and the dear public still ignores Shelley after a hundred years. In the course of time it became the conventional thing to read and admire Shelley, or to admire him whether one read him or not. That is, his "Skylark" and other nature poems were found to be admirable, just as Whitman's "Captain, My Captain" and the song of the bird in "Sea Drift" find favour with lovers of pure lyrics and are included in chaste unrevolutionary anthologies of poetry. But Shelley's poetic rage against tyranny is so far in advance of British life to-day, that if his ideas were put into prose (so that English people could understand them), and if they were propagated by the universities and reviews that know all about art, the government would order the troops out as promptly as it does when workmen strike for the right to live. Similarly Whitman's essential ideas must be ignored or comfortably misunderstood by the licensed thought-mongers, and the people must be taught that when any idea like Whitman's

appeals to them as right and just and truly democratic, they are "being cheated by demagogues," as Professor Santayana puts it.

So much argument is necessary to account for the stupidity of learned doctors and acknowledged teachers of æsthetics in their treatment of Whitman. They are the voice of entrenched respectability against every voice of democracy. Whether Whitman becomes the poet of the people depends solely on whether the people rise from their economic and spiritual slavery and organize a true democracy. Then only will disappear the possibility that a professor of reputed authority in matters of art and philosophy can find an analogy "between a mass of images without structure and the notion of an absolute democracy."

Whitman's poetry is no more without structure than Shakespeare's; and "an absolute democracy" would be the most highly organized and well constructed government possible. The disorder which Whitman pictures is the world as it is; his democracy is an ideal, a society of the future which is to grow out of the visible disorder of the present.

Whoever, then, does not understand what the word "democracy" means, whoever does not understand that we are not living in a democracy at all but in a timocracy, that is, under a capitalistic oligarchy, cannot understand Whitman — or any other radical thinker of the nineteenth century, Ruskin, Thoreau, Wagner, Tolstoy. Whitman, who understood men and affairs shrewdly,

is not under any delusion that the life about him is democratic. He chants it as a confusion, and celebrates it for what it may become. The true America is for him still asleep.

Why reclining, interrogating? why myself and all drowsing?  
What deepening twilight-scum floating atop of the waters? —  
Who are they as bats and night dogs askant at the capitol?  
What a filthy presidentiad! (O South, your torrid suns! O North,  
your arctic freezings!)  
Are those really congressmen? are those the great judges? is that the  
President?  
Then I will sleep awhile yet, for I see that these States sleep, for  
reasons;  
(With gathering murk, with muttering thunder and lambent shoots  
we shall all duly awake,  
South, North, East, West, inland and seaboard, we will surely  
awake).

The country is not yet awake, but all the countries of the world are turning in their sleep. I pick up this morning's copy of a labour paper, and read signs not yet understood by politicians or by professors of philosophy and economics. In that paper amid the news of the day, I find quotations from Whitman and Ruskin — small signs indicating, perhaps, only an editor who reads good books. When we wish to know what "the people" read, it is difficult to get a census, but if we are wise we do not try to find out by consulting the *New York Nation*.

In his "Song of the Broad Axe," Whitman chants the construction of Democracy, not the America of Mr. Bryce's

“Commonwealth,” nor the America of the Western continent,  
but the coming world of free men.

Where the city stands with the brawniest breed of orators and  
bards,

Where the city stands that is belov'd by these, and loves them in  
return and understands them,

Where no monuments exist to heroes but in the common words and  
deeds,

Where thrift is in its place, and prudence is in its place,

Where the men and women think lightly of the laws,

Where the slave ceases, and the master of slaves ceases,

Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity  
of elected persons,

Where fierce men and women pour forth as the sea to the whistle  
of death pours its sweeping and unript waves,

Where outside authority enters always after the precedence of in-  
side authority,

Where the citizen is always the head and ideal, and President,  
Mayor, Governor and what not, are agents for pay,

Where children are taught to be laws to themselves, and to depend  
on themselves,

Where equanimity is illustrated in affairs,

Where speculations on the soul are encouraged,

Where women walk in public processions in the streets the same  
as the men,

Where they enter the public assembly and take places the same as  
the men;

Where the city of the faithfulest friends stands,

Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands,

Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands,

Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,

There the great city stands.

This is not the city of any present land but the city of to-morrow.

Thou Mother with thy equal brood,  
Thou varied chain of different States, yet one identity only,  
A special song before I go I'd sing o'er all the rest,  
For thee, the future.

The whole of this splendid poem to a union as yet unfulfilled should take its place in collections of patriotic pieces, amid the national boasts in doggerel and the hymns that sing the warlike glories of the past. The songs of a nation probably have less influence on it than poets like to believe. Yet it would seem that a stronger nutriment than "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "The Star-Spangled Banner" must be provided for American children, if they are ever to breed a better race than we are, the race that Whitman proclaims.

The soul, its destinies, the real real,  
(Purport of all these apparitions of the real)  
In thee, America, the soul, its destinies,  
Thou globe of globes, thou wonder nebulous!  
By many a throe of heat and cold convulsed (by these thyself solidifying),  
Thou mental orb — thou New, indeed New, Spiritual World!  
The present holds thee not — for such vast growth as thine,  
For such unparallel'd flight as thine, such brood as thine,  
The Future only holds thee and can hold thee.

Whatever the future holds must be made of all the elements of the present. Therefore Whitman sings the universal

world-ground, actuality. "Leaves of Grass" is a progression, a development, natural, seemingly spontaneous, following and recording Whitman's personal growth, yet deliberately, consciously wrought to symbolize the growth of the world. "The Song of Myself" is a vast analogy representing the universe. To the superficial reader a purposeless string of details, it is really a song of the materials of which the poem of life is to be made. Out of it spring the songs of love, of national unity (that is, the common brotherhood of man), of cities, of nature, of war and its hero (Lincoln, the wise civilian), of religion, of death. Those who have not read Whitman or have been misled by those who have not read him, should open "Leaves of Grass" in the middle, and come under the spell of the self-explanatory beautiful things, "Sea Drift," "The Song of Joys," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and then, having got a liking for him, should read him through to understand him entire. The "Song of Myself" and "Children of Adam" are to be understood only as part of his whole development, and it may be that since they stand first in "Leaves of Grass," they have forbidden some readers to go deeper into the book.

At the beginning of his work he is belligerently advancing a new theory of poetry. The prose explanation of this theory is his "Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," which is as great a moment in the progress of criticism as "The Arte of English Poesie" and Wordsworth's prefaces to the "Lyrical Ballads." He holds that nothing, if deeply understood, is too ignoble for poetic ex-



pression, and that the true poet will not omit the facts of life.

I dare not shirk any part of myself,  
Not any part of America good or bad.

To enforce his doctrine that "a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars," he at first deliberately, even aggressively, selects commonplace things, repulsive things, "the corpse with its dabbled hair," the "sluff of boot soles," "what is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest." Under stress of his conviction he seems to go out of his way to mingle together the grotesque and the magnificent, the petty and the supernal. Later, when he takes himself more for granted and has less need to drive home his theory of poetic diction and poetic content, he is not so much inclined to what may seem a pell-mell catalogue; like other great poets he comes to full mastery of himself and his ideas. Therefore his later poems are more likely than his earlier ones to capture the new reader. At least let it be understood that he is not, even when he sings of "Me, Walt Whitman, Manhattanesse," blowing his own horn, but is personating man and the universe. "I am the man, I suffered and was there." "I am the hounded slave." "I am the mashed fireman with breast-bone broken." "I am the old artilleryman." "Not a youngster is taken for larceny but I go up too, and am tried and sentenced." "I tramp a perpetual journey."

Rightly comprehended, Whitman's central theme is a cosmic declaration of sympathy, a reverberant announcement

of the love and imagination which enable the great artist to identify himself with all the joys and sorrows of man. The idea has never been more mightily, more embracingly expressed, and its seemingly haphazard details are intended, calculated by a poet in confident command of his thought and his symbols, to suggest inclusion, a human-godlike numbering of the falling sparrow and measurement of the wide circuit of the star. Whitman breaks through all artificial boundaries erected by the blind hostilities of men, all castes, philosophies and schools that keep neighbours upon a common globe sundered from each other and from their common work. He strikes the mind from a hundred sides, to reach it somehow, if not with one detail then with another, to shock us out of our false conceits, deliver us from the prison of unsympathetic isolation. It is not he who is fragmentary and disparate, but our thoughts and interests. Great-hearted people love him and understand him. He is unintelligible or offensive to persons who have been deflected from him by some single verses and so have never entered him, and to persons whose education has cramped their humanity or who had little humanity to begin with. The new reader will find that he must read "Leaves of Grass" several times to get the full import of it. The central idea is expressed in its most compact form in "By Blue Ontario's Shores" and "A Song for Occupations." But "Leaves of Grass" is one poem, as truly as is Goethe's "Faust" or Dante's "*Divina Commedia*." It must be read entire, or it will not be understood even by those who eagerly accept and appreciate some of the parts.

Like an earlier lover of men, Whitman holds his arms about the poor and the diseased; like Wordsworth and Burns he finds beauty in the trench-digger and the breaker of stones. But no one before him ever gathered the world to his bosom with such immense tenderness. At thirty-five he phrased impulsively, as no one else has ever phrased it, that portrait of man-loving man which a few years later as hospital nurse he illustrated in his own conduct.

In no other volume of poetry, in neither Dante nor Shakespeare, are so *many* motives of life so powerfully suggested, blent, interfused as in "Leaves of Grass." Each motive, each person, each leaf is on a stipe which stands rooted in the universal ground. The songs of sexual love are pæans to nature. A woman's breast heaves like the sea, and fatherhood emblemizes the continuous procreation of the world which wills ever to be, never to cease. In the elegy on Lincoln, "lilac and star and bird" are twined in a song to Death. The friendships of men coil about the world and bind the races in a mystic, still unrealized, yet living human brotherhood. Comradeship flowers from the shambles of War. "Beautiful Death" becomes a mode of life. The "primal sanities" of nature are not shaken by bloody conflict. The sacred moon bathes the battlefield with impartial light as we all see it in physical nature and as Whitman makes us feel it in the meaning of nature. Love, the reconciler, enfolds all:

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,  
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be  
utterly lost,

That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly  
 wash again and ever again, this soil'd world;  
 For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,  
 I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin — I draw  
 near,  
 Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the  
 coffin.

Whitman, who viewed the world whole, who fitted each least word knowingly in its place, who celebrated the integrity of things, must be read whole. "Leaves of Grass" — let it be repeated with Whitmanian insistence — is a unit, an *ensemble*, to use a favourite word of his; it is not a fortuitous collection of passing moods and detached visions, but a total confession of a man's poetic faith, the end seen from the beginning, all perfectly articulate and wrought patiently by a master who knew as absolutely as Alexander Pope or any other rhetorically cunning poet just what his effect should be and how to arrive at it.

Single passages selected from Whitman may be misunderstood and have been misunderstood even by readers inclined to be appreciative. To take a comic example, the words "barbaric yawp" have been quoted by themselves as if they were Whitman's estimate of his poetry! He had no such poor opinion of himself; he thought his verse beautiful, he intended to make it beautiful, he was a passionate lover of exquisite sounds and sights. The passage which contains the words "barbaric yawp" is intelligible as a whole; it begins with a hawk swooping and crying over the roofs of the town; Whitman instantly identifies himself with the

hawk and flies and cries with it, as in another place he sonorously, murmuringly identifies himself with the surges of the sea, his father, his "fierce old mother."

A more serious illustration of the ruinous effect of selecting single poems and phrases out of Whitman, with no sense of his vocabulary as the rest of his poetry establishes and clarifies it, is the abusive quotation of parts of "The Children of Adam." Whitman, who sets out to praise the entire world, praises along with the rest what every honest man acknowledges, values, delights in, suffers from, the procreative impulse, the force which in our traditional literature few books except the Bible treat plainly, the force that romantic literature has perverted and comic literature has poisoned with its cynicism. Whitman makes us ashamed of our shame. "Sweet, sane still Nakedness in Nature," he says in "Specimen Days" — "Ah, if poor, sick, prurient humanity in cities might really know you once more! Is not nakedness then indecent? No, not inherently. It is your thought, your fear, your respectability that is indecent." The world has soiled us so indelibly that we shall need a century of regeneration and many powerful voices besides Whitman's to cure us of our hypocrisy and pusillanimity. The civilized man to-day knows that his words on this subject will be futile and suspect, and so he quotes gratefully from one of his superiors, Anne Gilchrist, a noble English woman, whose delicate purity responded to the superb purity of Whitman. In a letter to William M. Rossetti, the first English editor of Whitman, she writes:

"You argued rightly that my confidence would not be

betrayed by any of the poems in this book. None of them troubled me even for a moment; because I saw at a glance that it was not, as men had supposed, the heights brought down to the depths, but the depths lifted up level with the sunlit heights, that they might become clear and sunlit too. Always, for a woman, a veil woven out of her own soul — never touched upon even, with a rough hand, by this poet. But, for a man, a daring, fearless pride in himself, not a mock-modesty woven out of delusions — a very poor imitation of a woman's. Do they not see that this fearless pride, this complete acceptance of themselves, is needful for her pride, her justification? What! is it all so ignoble, so base, that it will not bear the honest light of speech from lips so gifted with 'the divine power to use words'? Then what hateful, bitter humiliation for her, to have to give herself up to the reality! Do you think there is ever a bride who does not taste more or less this bitterness in her cup? But who put it there? It must surely be man's fault, not God's that she has to say to herself, 'Soul, look another way — you have no part in this. Motherhood is beautiful, fatherhood is beautiful; but the dawn of fatherhood and motherhood is not beautiful.' Do they really think that God is ashamed of what He has made and appointed? And, if not, surely it is somewhat superfluous that they should undertake to be so for Him.

“ ‘The full-spread pride of man is calming and excellent to the soul,’

“Of a woman above all. It is true that instinct of silence I spoke of is a beautiful, imperishable part of nature too.



But it is not beautiful when it means an ignominious shame brooding darkly. Shame is like a very flexible veil, that follows faithfully the shape of what it covers — beautiful when it hides a beautiful thing, ugly when it hides an ugly one. It has not covered what was beautiful here; it has covered a mean distrust of a man's self and of his Creator. It was needed that this silence, this evil spell, should for once be broken, and the daylight let in, that the dark cloud lying under might be scattered to the winds. It was needed that one who could here indicate for us 'the path between reality and the soul' should speak. That is what these beautiful, despised poems, 'The Children of Adam,' do, read by the light that glows out of the rest of the volume: light of a clear, strong faith in God, of an unfathomably deep and tender love for humanity — light shed out of a soul that is 'possessed of itself.'"

The Platonic idea of love, as well expressed in some of Shakespeare's sonnets as anywhere in English literature, merges the love of individuals in the love of immortal beauty. It is a noble idea and seems at first sight not unlike Whitman's sinking of the personal in the universal. But the Platonic idea is a thin abstraction which denatures love, robs it of its human countenance in the process of eternalizing it. More vitally noble is Whitman's ideal which finds the body and soul of love in the bosom of living nature and glorifies the will to live, the irresistible urge of creation, one of the many voices by which the universe affirms that it shall not die. The individual love, its meeting and parting, is a token of the world, which is not "chaos

or death," but "form, union, plan," it is eternal life — it is happiness.

Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd, came a drop gently to me,  
 Whispering *I love you, before long I die,*  
*I have travel'd a long way merely to look on you to touch you,*  
*For I could not die till I once look'd on you,*  
*For I fear'd I might afterward lose you.*

Now we have met, we have look'd, we are safe,  
 Return in peace to the ocean, my love,

I too am part of that ocean, my love, we are not so much separated,  
 Behold the great rondure, the cohesion of all, how perfect!  
 But as for me, for you, the irresistible sea is to separate us,  
 As for an hour carrying us diverse, yet cannot carry us diverse  
 forever;

Be not impatient — a little space — know you I salute the air, the  
 ocean and the land,  
 Every day at sundown for your dear sake, my love.

Whitman is the poet of joy, of grave, deep, well-meditated joy, which breaks forth into moments of delirious ecstasy. There is a kind of joy often expressed by romantic poets which is followed by a sickly reaction; in the poetry of the nineteenth century it is seen sitting amid the ruins of a spurious mediævalism, wofully rubbing the morning head of disillusion. If, as in Browning, it marches victorious to the last, it pays for its continuance by falsifying life. Pippa's jubilant and morally efficacious song is so factitiously timed that disbelief refuses to remain suspended in a mind that sees life courageously from all sides. The curative, obviously cheering fact does not on most days of the world arrive on schedule like the doctor to a patient. Whitman is not

so blind that he must justify life by denying the odious parts of it; he is no timid, dishonest optimist, but bravely, even brutally, commands you to see all aspects of the conflict.

Strange and hard the paradox true I give,  
Objects gross and the soul unseen are one.

He warbles "unmitigated adoration" only after he has accepted life whole, "sized it up" and decided that the universe is not "a suck and a sell." Representing himself as a loafer, sipping delights here and there, he is no butterfly of the hour, but of all poets he is the one who faces death with eyes widest open, serenely comprehending it, and protesting plainly against the optimism that is founded on blind denial of facts.

"THE ROUNDED CATALOGUE DIVINE COMPLETE"

[Sunday, ——. *Went this afternoon to church. A college professor, Rev. Dr. — gave us a fine sermon, during which I caught the above words; but the minister included in his 'rounded catalogue' letter and spirit, only the esthetic things, and entirely ignored what I have named in the following.*]

The devilish and the dark, the dying and diseas'd,  
The countless (nineteen-twentieths) low and evil, crude and savage,  
The crazed, prisoners in jail, the horrible, rank, malignant,  
Venom and filth, serpents, the ravenous sharks, liars, the dissolute;  
(What is the part the wicked and the loathesome bear within earth's  
orbic scheme?)

Newts, crawling things in slime and mud, poisons,  
The barren soil, the evil men, the slag and hideous rot.

In another poem:

I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons  
upon labourers, the poor, and upon negroes and the like;  
All these — all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look  
out upon,  
See, hear, and am silent.

So facing life he yet names it joy, because joy is the force  
of life and the lack of it is real death, spiritual death.

Not to exclude or demarcate, or pick out evils from their formidable  
masses (even to expose them)  
But add, fuse, complete, extend — and celebrate the immortal and  
the good.

Joy, shipmate, joy!  
(Pleas'd to my soul at death I cry),  
Our life is closed, our life begins,  
The long, long anchorage we leave,  
The ship is clear at last, she leaps!  
She swiftly courses from the shore,  
Joy, shipmate, joy!

This for him at seventy is

#### THE CALMING THOUGHT OF ALL

That coursing on, whate'er men's speculations,  
Amid the changing schools, theologies, philosophies,  
Amid the bawling presentations new and old,  
The round earth's silent, vital laws, facts, modes continue.

In the year that "trembled and reeled beneath him":

Must I change my triumphant songs? said I to myself,  
Must I indeed learn to chant the cold dirges of the baffled?

And the sullen hymns of defeat?

And yet not you alone, twilight and hurrying ebb,

Nor you, ye lost designs alone — nor failures, aspirations;

I know, divine deceitful ones, your glamour's seeming;

Duly by you, from you, the tide and light again — duly the hinges  
turning,

Duly the needed discord-parts offsetting, blending,

Weaving from you, from Sleep, Night, Death itself,

The rhythmus of Birth Eternal.

This is his reflection on Hegel:

Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good  
steadily hastening towards immortality,

And the vast all that is call'd Evil I saw hastening to merge itself  
and become lost and dead.

Many a riotously delighted lover of life, many a thoughtless hedonist in the flush of youth, runs headlong against the fact of Death and is daunted, and from him we get the weary song of sorrow and parting and loneliness and the end. But Whitman in the heyday of his prime sees Death and embraces Him.

Death is beautiful . . . (what indeed is finally beautiful except death and love?)

O I think it is not for life I am chanting here my chant of lovers, I  
think it must be for death,

For how calm, how solemn it grows to ascend to the atmosphere of  
lovers,

Death or life, I am then indifferent, my soul declines to prefer,  
(I am not sure but the high soul of lovers welcomes death most)

. . . . .

Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may accord with it,  
 Give me yourself, for I see that you belong to me now above all,  
     and are folded inseparably together, you love and death are,  
 Nor will I allow you to balk me any more with what I was calling  
     life,  
 For now it is conveyed to me that you are the purports essential,  
 That you hide in these shifting forms of life, for reasons, and that  
     they are mainly for you.

In a great tragedy, Greek or Shakespearian, death is the solace and necessary end for sinful and unhappy lives, and the close leaves the soul of the spectator in peace, because bad, unhappy people are better dead. But life has a greater tragedy than that, the death of the young and the beautiful and the innocent; it is not a fitful fever upon which the blessed curtain falls, but the end is inexplicable and unfitting, and for that classic and romantic tragedy has no peaceful word to say. But Whitman sees in death one of the consolations of life, not because it stops the tragedy of evil, tortured lives, but because Impartial Death does not consider whether the life has been evil or good, happy or wretched; it is part of the joy of a tragedy that is never done and which needs no last act to give it reason, for the last act is the first and the first the last, and both are everlasting.

Come lovely and soothing death,  
 Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
 In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
 Sooner or later, delicate death.  
 Prais'd be the fathomless universe,  
 For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,  
 And for love, sweet love — but praise! praise! praise!



For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.  
Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,  
Have none chanted for thee a chant of the fullest welcome?  
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,  
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come un-  
falteringly.

Approach strong deliveress,  
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,  
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,  
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.  
From me to thee glad serenades,  
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and feastings  
for thee,  
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are  
fitting,  
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night,  
The night in silence under many a star,  
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,  
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,  
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.  
Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,  
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the  
prairies wide,  
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,  
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.

It is the purpose of philosophy and religion to be the ultimate reconcilers of all the facts of man's life and death. The theologies with their promise of individual beatitude, now perceptibly fading in the beliefs of men, do not so effectually rob death of its sting as does Whitman, the devout pagan. He is the bravest of all poets of death. The philosophies, now wavering between a half-hearted

rationalism and an idealism which is not philosophic at all but is an admixture in philosophy of unreasoned faiths, have not advanced one single argument so satisfying as Whitman's confident harmonies. The philosopher, erecting a reasonable view of life, is distinguished for his ability to leave life altogether out of his scheme, or to sew life up in a system as if it were a mummy, whereupon life takes a long breath and splits the seams.

Whitman's amplitude is elastic, it bears any strain of fact, yet it is positive, renerving, and does not, like the vast inconclusion of most philosophy, leave you exactly where you began. Whitman's religion fuses the rigidity of creeds, and is too great for creed-bound men.

O we can wait no longer,  
 We too take ship O soul,  
 Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas,  
 Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,  
 Amid the wafting winds (thou pressing me to thee,  
     I thee to me, O soul),  
 Caroling free, singing our song of God,  
 Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.

With laugh and many a kiss,  
 (Let others deprecate, let others weep for sin, remorse,  
     humiliation),  
 O soul thou pleasest me, I thee.  
 Ah, more than any priest O soul we too believe in God,  
 But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.

Lover divine and perfect Comrade,  
 Waiting content, invisible yet, but certain,

Be thou my God.

Thou, thou, the Ideal Man,

Fair, able, beautiful, content, and loving,

Complete in body and dilate in spirit,

Be thou my God.

O Death, (for Life has served its turn)

Opener and usher to the heavenly mansion,

Be thou my God.

Aught, aught of mightiest, best I see, conceive or know,

(To break the stagnant tie — thee, thee to free, O soul),

Be thou my God.

All great ideas, the races' aspirations,

All heroisms, deeds of rapt enthusiasts,

Be ye my Gods.

Or Time and Space,

Or shape of Earth divine and wondrous,

Or some fair shape I viewing, worship,

Or lustrous orb of sun or star by night,

Be ye my Gods.

This is a religion which Jews might kiss and infidels adore. Whitman's own use of the word "infidel" means one who is unfaithful to life. He reshapes traditional ethics, and ignores all the vicious virtues, such as tact, decorum, good taste, humility, remorse, and other dishonesties and degradations of the soul. Life is great and will not be judged by little standards. Poetry is the expression of life, grows with it and builds its own laws as it grows.

Whitman himself made much of the fact that he departed from the tradition of regular metres, and (as genius is frequently mistaken about itself) he thought that his departure was essential to his originality, whereas it was only one

expression of his originality, and not the capital expression. His true originality lies in the use he made of the metres he chose and not at all in the fact or the degree of their technical difference from other poetry. He created a new kind of poetry in so far forth as he created new poetry, and his creation is so powerful that whatever measure his words conform to at their best has become thereby established as a mode of poetry. A classic is one who makes new forms, or within old forms does things before undone. That the Elizabethan translation of the Hebrew poetry of the Bible takes a shape which is at once poetic and prosaic, the translators seeking only a conscientious true prose version, but various devices of Hebrew poetry, such as antithesis and refrain, inevitably showing through — this does not explain Whitman's form or even suggest its source. Equally beside the point is the well-known fact that all great emotional prose gathers itself together tensely, drops much of the grammatical superfluity of prose, rises to a kind of lyrical passion, and its prosaic "other harmony" is felt like a subcurrent of movement under the higher truly poetic pulsations. Whitman is the first great poet, who from feeling, or, as he would have it, from conviction and on principle, wrote unrhymed and unequal measures. When he began to make poetry he was a desultory reader, and it is safe to say that he never heard of some of the "sources" that critics like to dig out in order to account for him.

The difference between *vers libre* and more regular metrical schemes bears some analogy to the difference between music in which free melodic themes are developed to express

changing and progressive moods, and music on set patterns in which one stave springs from the preceding, is governed and limited by it. But analogies between the different arts should not be pressed too far. Poetry carries but a single thread of discourse; the words proceed in single file; whereas music may be, and in its great forms is, a fabric of themes; fifty voices in the orchestra may be speaking at once. There is, however, a sound human analogy between the ways in which Whitman and Wagner were received by some readers and listeners. Said some: "Whitman is not true to any known metre of preceding poets; therefore he is no poet." Similarly argued their music-loving brethren in about the same glorious year of the world: "Wagner does not obey the laws of music as the masters have practised them and the teachers have codified them; therefore he is no musician."

The man whose education has partly paralyzed his intelligence and spoiled his eyes and ears must hold a text-book up between himself and every work of art, and so he is always puzzled by the arrival of a new genius. And since he is not necessarily an ignoramus, but may be deeply familiar with the art of preceding times, he can make out an apparently good case against the innovator. The defender of a new master may cry out in the heat of partisanship: "Dolt! Dunce! If you do not understand Wagner's beauty, you never truly understood Bach or the simplest traditional melody. If you do not know at once that Whitman is a great poet, you never truly heard, read, enjoyed Milton and Shakespeare!" Yet, in point of fact, some of Wagner's

opponents were genuine musicians, and some of those whom Whitman offended were true poets, for example, Lanier. Musicians and poets and painters are sometimes most narrowly inhospitable to their brothers. The delight they feel, a lifelong joy, in certain works of art, is violated by innovations. They are offended as if, intensely loving one woman, they were asked to love another woman. Caring deeply for art, they suffer more acutely than the casual taster of art can appreciate. Byron did not like Keats; Fitzgerald was blind to Mrs. Browning; Emerson was deaf to Poe; Whittier threw Whitman in the fire; Lowell, Longfellow, and Holmes agreed that "Whitman was of no account." Swinburne first devoured Whitman and then disgorged him with an obscenity of expression more disgusting than anything of which Walt Whitman's shirt-sleeve style is capable. So the poets, who, as Poe said, are certainly the best critics of poetry, sometimes bring the weight of their authority against each other.

The ordinary reader can never have the aching joy and the painful aversions which are the poets' special privileges, but because he is ordinary he can gain in latitude what he lacks in depth. He can carry Poe in one coat pocket and Whitman in the other. He can share his affections between Keats and Byron; yes, he can let "Aurora Leigh" and "The Rubáiyát" stand together on his shelf of favourites. Since a man has not time to read much criticism, he should read the prose of the poets when they are celebrating each other, not when they are pushing each other off Parnassus. The warfare over Wagner, Ibsen, Whitman, need not dis-



tress us. "Tannhäuser," "Hedda Gabler," and "Leaves of Grass" have survived the rough reception they encountered in some quarters, and are healed of the blows that some very strong brother-giants of their authors administered to them. All we have to do is to listen to Whitman with the naked ear, the better if it has been refined by other poetry. In "Sea Drift" the bird which has lost its mate sings, and Whitman translates the notes, "following you, my brother."

Soothe! soothe! soothe!

Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,  
And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close,  
But my love soothes me not, not me.

Low hangs the moon, it rose late,  
It is lagging — O I think it is heavy with love, with love.  
O madly the sea pushes upon the land,  
With love, with love.

O night! do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers?  
What is that little black thing I see there in the white?  
Loud! loud! loud!

Loud I call to you, my love!  
High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves,  
Surely you must know who is here, is here,  
You must know who I am, my love.

Low-hanging moon!  
What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?  
O it is the shape, the shape of my mate!  
O moon do not keep me from her any longer.  
Land! land! O land!

Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me my mate back  
again if you only would,

For I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look.

O rising stars!

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Perhaps the one I want so much will rise, will rise with some of you.

O throat! O trembling throat!

Sound clearer through the atmosphere!

Pierce the woods, the earth,

Somewhere listening to catch you must be the one I want.

Shake out carols!

Solitary here, the night's carols!

Carols of lonesome love! death's carols!

Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!

O under that moon where she droops almost down into the sea!

O reckless, despairing carols.

But soft! sink low!

Soft! let me just murmur,

And do you wait a moment you husky-nois'd sea,

For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,

So faint, I must be still, be still to listen,

But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately  
to me.

Hither my love!

Here I am! here!

With this just-sustain'd note I announce myself to you,

This gentle call is for you, my love, for you.

Do not be decoy'd elsewhere,

That is the whistle of the wind, it is not my voice,

That is the fluttering, the fluttering of the spray,

Those are the shadows of leaves.

O darkness! O in vain!

O I am very sick and sorrowful.

O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!

O troubled reflection in the sea!

O throat! O throbbing heart!

And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.

O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!

In the air, in the woods, over fields,

Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!  
But my mate no more, no more with me!  
We two together no more.

If the ineffable loveliness of that is not evident at once, no critical argument will avail, for poetry wins its way directly or not at all. However, one who has studied the technique of poetry may be permitted to point out that Whitman's "aria" is as absolutely metrical in its way, as Shelley's "Skylark" and Keats's "Nightingale" are in theirs; that it lacks no essential of great lyric poetry which the ear can hear or the mind can designate. If any reader is dead to its unsurpassable beauty, no excuse is possible or necessary. But there is need of excuse or rebuke for those who are supposed to know something about poetry and who yet say, as more than one critic has said, that Whitman wrote prose because he could not write poetry, and that he is at his best in "Captain, My Captain" where he achieves "real poetic form." As if a master of words like Whitman could have any trouble writing rhymes and perfect iambics if he chose to write them! Wagner, forsooth, cannot resolve a chord or write a Lutheran hymn!

That Whitman can manage traditional forms, when it pleases him to try, is shown not only in "Captain, My Captain" but in a less known and very touching poem, "Ethiopia Saluting the Colours":

Who are you dusky woman, so ancient hardly human,  
With your woolly-white and turban'd head, and bare, bony feet?

Why rising by the roadside here, do you the colours greet?  
 ('Tis while our army lines Carolina's sands and pines,  
 Forth from thy hovel door thou Ethiopia com'st to me,  
 As under doughty Sherman I march toward the sea.)

*Me master years a hundred since from my parents sunder'd  
 A little child, they caught me as the savage beast is caught,  
 Then hither me across the sea the cruel slaver brought.*

No further does she say, but lingering all the day,  
 Her high-borne turban'd head she wags, and rolls her darkling eye,  
 And courtesies to the regiments, the guidons moving by.

What is it fateful woman, so blear, hardly human?  
 Why wag your head with turban bound, yellow, red and green?  
 Are the things so strange and marvelous you see or have seen?

Moreover, "Captain, My Captain," wonderful as it is, is less magnificent verse than "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," with its progression and cross-weaving of themes; and "Ethiopia Saluting the Colours," perfect itself, is inferior to the majestic symbolism of "The Song of the Banner at Daybreak."

When Whitman fails (and like other great poets he sometimes fails to be his best), his failure is due not to his form, but to his failure to make poetry in it, precisely as Wordsworth and Shakespeare fail in line after line of strictly methodical blank verse.

Whitman's rhythms flow with his thought and emotion; they are part of his thought; the intermerging of sound and idea is the miracle that happens in all true poetry. It is a fatuous mistake to say that he writes imperfect hexameters. Many of his lines are dactylic in rhythm.

Other lines are iambic. Those two measures reside in the accents of English words. The following line is a specimen of his dactylic movement:

When million-footed Manhattan unpent descends to her pavements.

But this movement seldom continues for more than two or three lines at a time. This is a specimen of iambic pursued for several lines.

In other scenes than these have I observ'd thee flag,  
Not quite so trim and whole and freshly blooming in folds of stain-  
less silk,  
But I have seen thee bunting, to tatters torn upon thy splinter'd  
staff,  
Or clutch'd to some young colour-bearer's breast with desperate  
hands,  
Savagely struggled for, for life or death, fought over long  
'Mid cannons' thunder-crash and many a curse and groan and  
yell, and rifle-volleys cracking sharp,  
And moving masses as wild demons surging, and lives as nothing  
risk'd,  
For thy mere remnant grimed with dirt and smoke and sopp'd in  
blood,  
For sake of that, my beauty, and that thou might'st dally as now  
secure up there,  
Many a good man have I seen go under.

Whitman's thought often runs to antithesis and contrast, and his lines conform to the meaning in a rising and falling movement, a slow-pulsing systole and diastole, like the resurgent and receding seas. There is a fitness, accidental or calculated, most likely inseparable from

the sound of the right words for the sense — a special fitness of Whitman's measures to the sea. The voice of the breakers is in his chants, the uprushing waves and their foaming subsidence, as though Whitman were an elemental power resonantly answering to his equal in nature.

You sea! I resign myself to you also — I guess what you mean,  
 I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,  
 I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me,  
 We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight of  
     the land,  
 Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,  
 Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.  
 Sea of stretch'd ground-swells,  
 Sea breathing loud and convulsive breaths,  
 Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell'd but always ready graves,  
 Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty sea,  
 I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases.

Here and in the whole of "Sea Drift" has been fulfilled his aspiration:

Had I the choice to tally greatest bards,  
 To limn their portraits, stately beautiful, and emulate at will,  
 Homer with all his wars and warriors — Hector, Achilles, Ajax,  
 Or Shakspeare's woe-entangled Hamlet, Lear, Othello —  
 Tennyson's fair ladies,  
 Metre or wit the best, or choice conceit to wield in perfect rhyme,  
     delight of singers;  
 These, these, O sea, all these I'd gladly barter,  
 Would you the undulation of one wave, its trick to me transfer,  
 Or breathe one breath of yours upon my verse,  
 And leave its odour there.



His verse, like the sea, is like the winds also, and like life. Its eager forward propulsions are as his own vision of joy. It has that energy which Baudelaire called the supreme grace. Only because laggard criticism sometimes denies his magnificent art, is it necessary to insist on his form and be curious of metrical questions. One must stand back to see, to comprehend, him. As a portrait viewed close disintegrates into ridges and smears of paint, as Rodin's sculpture is not for the microscope, so Whitman's lines can be analyzed, pulverized to lifelessness. They should be chanted aloud in a large free way.

No reader of Whitman can neglect his prose, for like all great poets he writes excellent prose. He is an admirable direct judge of men and events, of other poets. Intensely serious, almost humourless in his poetry, he is in his prose a genial, off-hand speaker, full of fun, at once burly and gentle. And he is often poetically eloquent in his prose, throwing off a great phrase, suggesting, as if casually, a splendid idea, the unused surplus of poetic material which lies inexhaustible in the minds of very great poets. "Democratic Vistas" and "Specimen Days" are collections of observations and jottings, great books, as Jonson's "Timber" is a great book. Almost every paragraph is pregnant — from his dreadfully real and beautifully patient accounts of the "real war that will never get in the books," to his dreamy detached musings on the sea and the stars. It would be profitable for those interested in Whitman but still perplexed by questions of form (irrelevancies with which earnest readers of literature are needlessly filled up, to the

clotting and clogging of their native senses), to compare Whitman's own prose with his poetry and thus understand their essential differences. The prose is often fine, oracular, full of terse metaphors and long free undulations, but its accent is the accent of words spoken, not sung.

"The spread of waves and gray-white beach, salt, monotonous, senseless — such an entire absence of art, books, talk, elegance — so indescribably comforting, even this winter day — grim, yet so delicate-looking, so spiritual — striking emotional, impalpable depths, subtler than all the poems, paintings, music I have ever read, seen, heard. (Yet let me be fair, perhaps it is because I have read those poems and heard that music.)" There is text for a whole essay about Whitman in that one passage.

Whitman was a great talker, and his friends have remembered many of his words and recorded them. Mr. Horace Traubel, his devoted friend and biographer, took down his conversations Boswell-fashion, and is printing volume after volume of them. There is a difference between Mr. Traubel's work and Boswell's, a difference in Mr. Traubel's favour. Whitman is a much greater, more original man than Doctor Johnson. Moreover, Boswell selected and made a work of balanced art out of the materials of his hero's life. When Johnson said stupid things and Boswell had sense enough to know they were stupid, he discreetly omitted them. Mr. Traubel goes at his task in a manner appropriate to Whitman and to the new ideal of realism in biography. He sets down everything that he can remember. If you do not wish to read it, that is your affair. But it is all set

down, and if you do not read it you miss the richest intellect in America. Whitman's character requires no suppressions. He bears every test of a method of publicity which is neither hero-worshipful nor "pitiless," but simply matter-of-fact and indiscriminate as nature. Capable like all great souls of deep reticence, in spite of his garrulous candour, Whitman moved at ease among books and men, and spoke his ample mind, challenging men and things less and loving them more as he grew to full stature and became the nurse of men and the celebrant of Lincoln, laureate and national chief of equal height. Then, stricken with paralysis as a result of his labours during the war, he lived to a softened, benignant old age, a powerful personality even when "laid up on the beach," fulfilling, more nearly than the man who phrased it, the ideal of a poet who makes his life a poem.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Walter Whitman was born on Long Island, New York, May 31, 1819, and died at Camden, New Jersey, March 25, 1892. He had no "education" beyond the primary schools. He spent his youth reading, observing, loafing. He was for a time a school teacher, a compositor and an editor. He edited the *Brooklyn Eagle* in 1874-8. The next year he tramped over the country west to the Great Lakes, south to New Orleans, supporting himself by free-lance contributions to newspapers. In 1851-52 he owned and edited a newspaper in Brooklyn. He spent some time as carpenter and builder. During the war he wrote for the newspapers and was volunteer nurse in the hospitals at Washington.

He was clerk in several departments of the Government at Washington from 1865 to 1874, when he was stricken with partial paralysis. He lived the rest of his life at Camden, New Jersey. His poetry meant a practical as well as an intellectual fight. It involved him in trouble with one chaste official at Washington on whom he depended for his clerkship, but his friends got him a place in another department. In Boston his publishers, Osgood and Company, were legally compelled to withdraw his book from circulation because he refused to consent to the omission of passages indicated by the District Attorney. The meddlers who made complaint were the vicious Society for the Suppression of Vice. The Boston postmaster who excluded the book from the mail was directed from Washington to admit it. The result of official interference was to advertise Whitman's poetry and make officialdom look as foolish as he always believed it to be long before he personally felt its impertinence and "the never ending audacity of elected persons." The last years of his life were peaceful and were made happy by appreciation.

His works are: *Leaves of Grass*, 1855, 1856, 1860, 1867, 1871, 1882, 1883; *Drum Taps*, 1865; *Passage to India*, 1870; *Democratic Vistas*, 1871; *Memoranda During the War*, 1875; *Specimen Days*, 1882; *November Boughs*, 1888; *Good-bye, My Fancy*, 1891; *Autobiographia*, etc., 1892. Recent editions of *Leaves of Grass* include all his poetry, for he added his later verse to it as "Annexes."

The best Life of Whitman consists of his own "Autobiographia, or the Story of a Life," "Specimen Days, etc.,"

and his conversations, "With Walt Whitman in Camden," edited by his executor, Horace Traubel. The Life by Richard Maurice Bucke is authentic. A good study is that by the English writer, H. B. Binns. Stevenson's essay in "Familiar Studies of Men and Books" wavers between hearty praise and a fear that he and Whitman will be misunderstood, so that its effect is inconclusive. The essay by Professor George Santayana in "Poetry and Religion" is a perfect justification of Whitman's dislike of "æsthetics." The essay by Anne Gilchrist found in "Her Life and Writings," quoted from above, is excellent. J. A. Symonds's "Walt Whitman: A Study" is sympathetic. John Burroughs's "Whitman: A Study" is the work of a friend and a wise man. William D. O'Connor's "The Good Gray Poet" is a fiery piece of eloquence in defence of Whitman, still good reading, but unnecessarily hot to a generation which does not question Whitman's greatness. Swinburne's attack published in the *Fortnightly Review*, August, 1887, should be read by all interested in either Whitman or Swinburne. One of the best books is "Days with Walt Whitman" by the English poet and philosopher, Edward Carpenter. Many opinions of Whitman are collected in "In Re Walt Whitman," edited by the literary executors, Traubel, Bucke, and Harned.

## CHAPTER XIII

### MARK TWAIN

"GULLIVER'S TRAVELS" is to be found in two editions, one for adult minds, the other for adventurous immaturity. The texts differ but little, if at all; differences are mainly differences in the reader. For one audience "Gulliver's Travels" is a story book like "Robinson Crusoe" and "Treasure Island." For the other audience it is a tremendous satire on human nature, a vast portrait of man, the nakedly simple narrative uttering profundities before which the sentimental quail and hypocrites wear an unhappy smile. The boy who follows the strange fortunes of Doctor Gulliver does not know that Swift is talking over his head to the parents who gave the boy the wonder book. All satire is dual in its nature. It speaks in parable, saying one thing and meaning a deeper parallelism. It is a preacher in cap and bells.

To the holiday mood of the world and the wholesomely childish popular mind Mark Twain's books, like "Gulliver's Travels," appeal instantly. For forty years he has been a favourite comedian, a beloved jester, picturesque, histrionic in all his public attitudes. His books have been sold by hundreds of thousands. Of "Joan of Arc," one of his least popular books ("I wrote it for love," he says, "and never expected it to sell"), sixteen thousand copies were sold in



the years from 1904 to 1908. Mark Twain was the most successful man of letters of his time; in the duration and variety of his powers, in the number and enthusiasm of his audience he has no rival in English literature after Dickens.

To say in the face of that towering popularity that he is greater than his reputation may seem praise beyond reason, and it may be presumptuous to suggest that the millions who admire him do not all know how great a man they admire or what in him is most admirable. Nevertheless it is true that this incorrigible and prolific joker has kept the world chuckling so continuously that it has not sobered down to comprehend what a powerful, original thinker he is. If you mention his name, some one says, "Oh, yes! do you remember what he said when it was reported that he was dead?" You smile appreciatively and insist, "Yes, but have you read 'Joan of Arc'? Have you really read, since you grew up, the greatest piece of American fiction, 'Huckleberry Finn'?" The response is apt to be more willing than intelligent. Some men of letters, like Mr. Bernard Shaw, and some critics, such as Professor W. L. Phelps and Professor Brander Matthews, have measured his significance. Mr. Howells, after warning us not to forget the joker in the gravity of our admiration, said it all in a few words, "Clemens, the sole and incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature." Other critics remain truer to the critic type by condescending to contemporary greatness and reserving highest praise for Mark Twain's equals who lived long ago, Swift, Molière, Cervantes, Fielding. As an example of the timid ineptitude of critics in the presence of living greatness, I quote from a

handbook of American literature published five or six years ago. In it "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" is called a "cruel parody of Malory's 'Morte d'Arthur.'" It is not cruel and it is not a parody; in other respects the criticism is profoundly true. "It is unfortunate" — says the same handbook — "it is unfortunate for Mr. Clemens that he is a humorist; no one can ever take such a man seriously." It is unfortunate; just as it is a burning shame that Lamb was not an epic poet and that Swift was not a church historian.

To take humorists seriously is superficially incongruous. We should approach all satirists from Aristophanes to George Meredith in a spirit of gay delight. If we talk too solemnly about them, their spirits will wink us out of countenance. However, it is a well-established custom to discuss masters of humour, who have been dead a long time, as if they were really important in the history of human thought; and, without a too ponderous solemnity, one may seriously praise and expound the wisdom of the great laugh-maker who died two years ago.

Mark Twain began as a newspaper reporter, a "funny-column" man. He was a natural story-teller; his delightful, flexible voice was a melancholy vehicle for outrageous absurdities, and the mask of a grieved and puzzled countenance was a gift of the gods to a platform humorist. His natural talents of mind and manner made him successful on the Pacific Coast before he thought of himself as a professional man of letters. As he grew older, he cultivated the gifts which he had discovered by accident, came in time to a

perfect and conscious command of his art, and by much reading and writing and experience made himself a very great master of prose.

His first book of sketches, printed in 1867, is of no better quality than the work of hundreds of newspaper men who put a little fun into their day's scribbling and so get a little fun out of it. The sketches had given Clemens a local reputation before they were printed as a book, and prompted the proprietors of the *Alta California* to send him on the famous voyage of the steamer *Quaker City*. The report of that voyage is "Innocents Abroad," a first-rate book of travel, which revealed at once an accomplished writer of sincere, vigorous English. As if the spirit of incongruities had conspired to make fun doubly funny, "Innocents Abroad" has been regarded, by those who read with any part of their organism except their intellect, as an expression of American irreverence grinning at the august beauties of Europe. So far as it is disrespectful, its satire is aimed at the dishonest American tourist, at the gaping pretender who feigns to see beauty where it is not, or where he does not see it, and misses beauty where it is. Upon the "pilgrims" with their fraudulent enthusiasms, their vandal thefts of "souvenirs" from places that they call sacred, the clerk of the party pours his scornful ridicule. To swindlers who exploit art and antiquity for the sake of the tourist's dollar he gives no quarter. Romances that thoughtless people accept as lovely but which are essentially base, like the story of Abelard, he tears to shreds. The unshakable realist here begins to deal those blows to sentimentality and pretension which ring through

all his work to the last.\* Disingenuous books of travel he piles in a heap, sets fire to them and dances round the pyre.

"Nearly every book concerning Galilee and its lake describes the scenery as beautiful. No — not always so straightforward as that. Sometimes the *impression* intentionally conveyed is that it is beautiful, at the same time that the author is careful not to *say* that it is, in plain Saxon. But a careful analysis of these descriptions will show that the materials of which they are formed are not individually beautiful and cannot be wrought into combinations that are beautiful. The veneration and the affection which some of these men felt for the scenes they were speaking of heated their fancies and biased their judgment; but the pleasant falsities they wrote were full of honest sincerity at any rate. Others wrote as they did, because they feared it would be unpopular to write otherwise. Others were hypocrites and deliberately meant to deceive. Any of them would say in a moment, if asked, that it is *always* right and always *best* to tell the truth. They would say that, at any rate, if they did not perceive the drift of the question. But why should not the truth be spoken of this region? Is the truth harmful? Has it ever needed to hide its face? God made the Sea of Galilee and its surroundings as they are. Is it the province of Mr. Grimes to improve upon the work? I am sure, from the tenor of the books I have read, that many who have visited this land in years gone by were Presbyterians, and came seeking evidences in support of their

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\*Be it noted, as is proper in a consideration of a master of irony and hater of sham, that Mark Twain was himself a sentimentalist at least once, in "A Dog's Tale."

particular creed; they found a Presbyterian Palestine, and they had already made up their minds to find no other, though possibly they did not know it, being blinded by their zeal. Others were Baptists, seeking Baptist evidences and a Baptist Palestine. Others were Catholics, Methodists, Episcopalians, seeking evidences indorsing their creeds, and a Catholic, a Methodist, an Episcopalian Palestine. Honest as these men's intentions may have been, they were full of partialities and prejudices, they entered the country with their verdicts already prepared, and they could no more write dispassionately and impartially about it than they could about their own wives and children. Our pilgrims have brought *their* verdicts with them. They have shown it in their conversation ever since we left Beirout. I can almost tell, in set phrase, what they will say when they see Tabor, Nazareth, Jericho, and Jerusalem — *because I have the books they will 'smouch' their ideas from.* These authors write pictures and frame rhapsodies, and lesser men follow and see with the author's eyes instead of their own, and speak with his tongue."

The passage expresses Mark Twain's lifelong attitude toward books and men. He looked on the world with a serious, candid and penetrating eye, analyzing the human fool, affectionately tolerant of his folly except when it is mixed with meanness and cruelty. In a letter he wrote shortly before his death he said, referring to his book on Shakespeare: "In that booklet I courteously hinted at the long-ago well established fact that even the most gifted human being is merely an ass, & always an ass, when his for-

bears have furnished him an idol to worship. Reasoning cannot convert him, facts cannot influence him. I wrote the booklet for pleasure — *not* in the expectation of convincing anybody that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare. And don't *you* write with any such expectation. Such labors are not worth the ink & the paper — except when you do them for the pleasure of it. Shakespeare the Stratford tradesman will still be the divine Shakespeare to our posterity a thousand years hence."

In "Innocents Abroad," the self-deceptions and pious buncome of the pilgrims, the mendacious guides, the "tall" traditional stories told for money to tourists by vergers and ciceroni (stories beside which "American exaggeration" is shrinking understatement) — all these impositions move the recording Innocent to cut capers, to play the vacant idiot, and then to pour out one of his level streams of deadly accurate and demolishing irony. It is a pleasure to read him in his abusive moods, and it was a greater pleasure to hear him in one of his coolly passionate tirades, speaking sentences amazingly finished and constructed as if a prose style were as natural to him as breathing, in a voice even, deliberate, modulated and sweet with rage.

Besides much excellent fooling and vigorous destruction of what is revered but not reverend, there is in "Innocents Abroad" a good deal of fine, clear description of things seen. Indeed the book is on the whole a serious report of sights and events. The characterization of the pilgrims reveals the gift that was later to draw shrewd portraits of human beings, real and fictitious. Mark Twain shows in this book, as in



much of his writing, the deep enthusiasm for natural beauty which is impossible to people who can harbour dishonest admirations. The description of Vesuvius is powerful, graphic, as fresh as if no other man had seen and described it.

Clemens's next book, "Roughing It," is "merely a personal narrative" describing "the rise, growth and culmination of the silver mining fever in Nevada." It appeared at the time when Bret Harte was capturing the fancy of unsophisticated readers with his delightful, disingenuous tales of the Wild West. "O. Henry," in some respects a better story-teller than Bret Harte, has said that the editors of New York magazines (and their Eastern readers) are so naïvely ignorant that in a cowboy yarn the author can stab a man with a lariat and they will not know the difference. To this romantic ignorance Bret Harte appealed with pictures of a theatric California and portraits of miners such as never dug in the real earth. His tales are skilfully written, humorous, quasi-pathetic and engagingly readable, but they are made "for export" to people who do not know the flavour of better native wines. In his book, "Is Shakespeare Dead?" Mark Twain says: "I know the argot of the quartz-mining and milling industry familiarly; and so whenever Bret Harte introduces that industry into a story, the first time one of his miners opens his mouth I recognize from his phrasing that Harte got the phrasing by listening — like Shakespeare — I mean the Stratford one — not by experience. No one can talk the quartz dialect correctly without learning it with pick and shovel and drill and fuse."

Harte's unreality is deeper than that; he is a sentimen-

talist, who makes untrustworthy assays of man and society. He mistakes the iron pyrites of melodrama and farce for the gold-bearing quartz of human nature. This is not to deny Bret Harte's merits, which are genuine if not of a high order. He is not exceptional in his attitude toward life and toward fiction. Too many American story-tellers of considerable literary skill are thinly romantic; they move in regions of artificial adventure and moonlit emotion. Only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century did the spirit of realism find itself at home among a people reputed to be sensible and practical, but really sentimental and foolish and content with a conduct of private and public affairs that fills an intelligent business man with despair. Their thinking is childish, and they swallow with delight any silly story, whether it is presented as a work of fiction or a fact of history and government.

The first strong voice of realism in the western part of America is Mark Twain, and "Roughing It" is its first expression — a statement that some Americans would probably meet by pointing out that Mark Twain changes the names of Nevada people and invents things that really did not happen! Imagination is wasted on a people who hug Mark Twain's jokes as a child hugs a jumping-jack and do not know that "Roughing It" is an important social study, reconstructing in its own unmethodical fashion a phase of American history, a section of the national life. Under the touch of a great instinctive humourist, whose vision is sharp and undeluded, whose lively caricature plays over a cold sense of fact, the silver boom-town, its comedy and tragedy,

takes permanent and accurate shape for the benefit of an inquisitive posterity that will wish to study our social history.

In "The Gilded Age" Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner worked together two claims, only one of which shows real metal. The story is of two sets of characters brought together in a forced and unconvincing unity. The young people from the east with their commonplace love affairs figure in one plot, which crosses the fortunes and misfortunes of Colonel Sellers and his family. Everything in the book except Colonel Sellers may be sacrificed without great loss to literature. Sellers is a colossal comic creation, the embodied spirit of western mushroom hopes and bubble enterprise. The type is so true to human nature, and especially to American human nature in a land of rapid haphazard exploitation, sudden wealth and disastrous "progress," that the authors were besieged with claimants for the honour of having sat as model. There was a real person, a kinsman of Clemens, who suggested the character, but there was no model except perennial humanity. The book as a whole is amateurish and lacking in cohesion. One suspects that Colonel Sellers kept the two humourists gayly interested in the work, and that they made up the rest of the book in a perfunctory way at a low pitch of creative enthusiasm. Some years later in "The American Claimant" Mark Twain brought Colonel Sellers on the stage again. In this book, as in "The Gilded Age," the story is nothing (unless it is a "cruel parody" of "Little Lord Fauntleroy"). But Sellers is himself, generous and pathetically lovable, for all his

sham wisdom and magniloquent inflation. He is, like Don Quixote and some of Dickens's characters, drawn taller than life-size, but he is true to the outlines of humanity, a pantographic enlargement of man.

The delight with which the public received Colonel Sellers encouraged Clemens to try another work of fiction. He wrote one of the best of boys' books, "Tom Sawyer." The adventure in the cave and the finding of gold are the good old-fashioned stuff of dime novels. Mark Twain, like that other wise man with the heart of a boy, Stevenson, has taken the traditional boy romance and made it literature. Except for its one affluent adventure in treasure-trove, the book is all actual boy life, a masterly biography of the universal youngster. The adult novel in America is not yet adult, but four men of letters, Aldrich, Warner, Mr. Howells and Mark Twain, have limned us immortally as we all were in the golden age. It may be that "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn," Aldrich's "Story of a Bad Boy," Howells's "Flight of Pony Baker," and Warner's "Being a Boy" are the reaction of humour and naturalism against the era of St. Rollo.

Like all true books about boys, "Tom Sawyer" gives glimpses of the social conditions and habits of the older generation. There are wider glimpses in "Huckleberry Finn." Indeed this is more than a boy's book or a book about boys. It is a study of many kinds of society seen through eyes at once innocent and prematurely sage. Those who are fond of classifying books may see in "Huckleberry Finn" a new specimen of the picaresque novel of adventure; some clas-

sifiers, going back further for analogies, have called it the "Odyssey of the Mississippi," which is strikingly inept. It is a piece of modern realism, original, deep and broad, and it is in American literature deplorably solitary. It is one of the unaccountable triumphs of creative power that seem to happen now and again, as "Robinson Crusoe" happened, and the surrounding intellectual territory has not its comrade.

Huck's dialect is a marvel of artistry. As Clemens says in a significant preface, the shadings in the dialects reported by Huck "have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech." To maintain Huck's idiom and through it to describe a storm on the Mississippi with intense vividness; through the same dialect to narrate the tragic feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons; to hint profound social facts through the mouth of a boy and not violate his point of view — this is the work of a very great imagination. Huck's reflection on Tom Sawyer's proposal to "steal a nigger out of slavery" is a more dramatic revelation of the slaveholder's state of mind than "Uncle Tom's Cabin," and expresses more powerfully than a thousand treatises the fact that "morality" is based on economic and social conditions.

"Well, one thing was dead sure, and that was that Tom Sawyer was in earnest, and was actually going to help steal that nigger out of slavery. That was the thing that was too many for me. Here was a boy that was respectable and well

brung up; and had a character to lose; and folks at home that had characters; and he was bright and not leather-headed; and knowing and not ignorant; and not mean, but kind; and yet here he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, before everybody."

Colonel Sherburn's speech to the crowd that came to lynch him is a sermon on cowardice and valour delivered to the American bully. It is Mark Twain uttering one of his favourite ideas through the Colonel. (Perhaps Huck would not have reported the Colonel's words so accurately.)

"They swarmed up in front of Sherburn's palings as thick as they could jam together, and you couldn't hear yourself think for the noise. It was a little twenty-foot yard. Some sung out, 'Tear down the fence! tear down the fence!' Then there was a racket of ripping and tearing and smashing, and down she goes, and the front wall of the crowd begins to roll in like a wave.

"Just then Sherburn steps out on to the roof of his little front porch, with a double-barrel gun in his hand, and takes his stand, perfectly ca'm and deliberate, not saying a word. The racket stopped, and the wave sucked back.

"Sherburn never said a word — just stood there, looking down. The stillness was awful creepy and uncomfortable. Sherburn run his eye slow along the crowd; and wherever it struck, the people tried to outgaze him, but they couldn't; they dropped their eyes and looked sneaky. Then pretty soon Sherburn sort of laughed; not the pleasant kind, but



the kind that makes you feel like when you are eating bread that's got sand in it.

"Then he says, slow and scornful:

"The idea of *you* lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a *man*! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a *man*? Why, a *man's* safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind — as long as it's daytime and you're not behind him.

"Do I know you? I know you clear through. I was born and raised in the South, and I've lived in the North; so I know the average all around. The average man's a coward. In the North he lets anybody walk over him that wants to, and goes home and prays for a humble spirit to bear it. In the South one man, all by himself, has stopped a stage full of men in the daytime, and robbed the lot. Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you *are* braver than any other people — whereas you're just *as* brave, and no braver. Why don't your juries hang murderers? Because they're afraid the man's friends will shoot them in the back, in the dark — and it's just what they *would* do.

"So they always acquit; and then a *man* goes in the night, with a hundred masked cowards at his back, and lynches the rascal. Your mistake is that you didn't bring a man with you; that's one mistake, and the other is that you didn't come in the dark and fetch your masks. You brought *part*

of a man — Buck Harkness, there — and if you hadn't had him to start you, you'd a taken it out in blowing.

“‘You didn't want to come. The average man don't like trouble and danger. *You* don't like trouble and danger. But if only *half* a man — like Buck Harkness, there — shouts ‘Lynch him! lynch him!’ you're afraid to back down — afraid you'll be found out to be what you are — *cowards* — and so you raise a yell, and hang yourselves on to that half-a-man's coat-tail, and come raging up here, swearing what big things you're going to do. The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is — a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any *man* at the head of it is *beneath* pitifulness. Now the thing for *you* to do is to droop your tails and go home and crawl in a hole. If any real lynching's going to be done it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion; and when they come they'll bring their masks, and fetch a *man* along. Now *leave* — and take your half-a-man with you' — tossing his gun up across his left arm and cocking it when he says this.

“The crowd washed back sudden, and then broke all apart, and went tearing off every which way, and Buck Harkness he heeled it after them, looking tolerable cheap. I could a stayed if I wanted to, but I didn't want to.”

“The Prince and the Pauper,” which like “Huckleberry Finn,” is read with delight by children, is a parable in democracy. Lazarus and Dives, in the figures of two pretty boys, change places, and for once the mighty learn by experience

how the other half lives. The same idea is dramatized in "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court," where the king, incognito, goes out among the people. Mark Twain hated the lords of the earth. In "The Czar's Soliloquy" his hatred is at a white heat. In the course of one of those enchanting monologues with which he entertained his guests he said that every Russian child should drink in with his mother's milk the resolution to kill a czar, "until every Romanoff would rather sit on a stool in his back yard than on a throne of crime." He laughed also at the hypocrisy of false republicanism and proved that every democrat loves a lord and why. Humanity, ridiculous, pathetic and pretentious, is all divided into castes, each caste merciless and snobbish. Its portrait is drawn in this passage from "A Connecticut Yankee":

"Toward the shaven monk who trudged along with his cowl tilted back and the sweat washing his fat jowls, the coal-burner was deeply reverent; to the gentleman he was abject; with the small farmer and the free mechanic he was cordial and gossipy; and when a slave passed by with a countenance respectfully lowered, this chap's nose was in the air — he couldn't even see him. Well, there are times when one would like to hang the whole human race and finish the farce." That is written not about a mythical England of the dark ages, but about *us*. The book is a satire on society. Two conditions of uncivilization are thrown into grotesque contrast primarily for the fun of it all, and also for the sake of flaying priesthood and kingship. The book is not a "parody" of "Morte d'Arthur," and it

is not cruel. Mark Twain would not have been so witless as to parody a harmless old book; he is not interested in Malory, but in man, and especially in the conflict between man's intelligence and his superstitions.

It is, however, worth noting that like all wise men who chance to give their opinions about books Mark Twain is a good critic. He touches unerringly on Malory's weaknesses, his lack of humour and his inability to characterize. In Malory Sir Dinadan is represented as having delivered a convulsing ballad, but Malory cannot give the ballad, or furnish his humourist with anything to say. Mark Twain seizes this chance to make Sir Dinadan the court bore. Sandy tells the Yankee a story which is taken from Malory, and the Yankee makes a comment which is a just and compact criticism of that inchoate bundle of legends. "When you come to figure up results, you can't tell one fight from another, nor who whipped; and as a picture of living, raging, roaring battle, sho! why, it's pale and noiseless — just ghosts scuffling in a fog. Dear me, what would this barren vocabulary get out of the mightiest spectacle? — the burning of Rome in Nero's time, for instance? Why, it would merely say, 'Town burned down; no insurance; boy brast a window; fireman brake his neck!' Why, that ain't a picture!"

Clemens was a shrewd critic of books because he was a shrewd critic of men. He was not hypnotized by what other people thought of the good and the great; he thought for himself. The essays on Cooper and Shelley and Mr. Howells are better than most of the work of professional critics. Some of his casual remarks about books and authors

are memorable. He disliked "The Vicar of Wakefield," because the misadventure of Moses at the fair is represented as funny, whereas it is a pathetic and touching thing when a boy is deceived. Clemens had no admiration for Jane Austen and used to argue with Mr. Howells, who adores her. Most people will agree with Mr. Howells, but nobody can forget, once he has heard it, Mark Twain's way of putting his disapproval: "A very good library can be started by leaving Jane Austen out."

"A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" has obvious kinship to "Don Quixote." Both books satirize the ideals of a spurious chivalry. Don Quixote, an idealist, tilts with facts and is beaten, until finally his mind is "freed from the dark clouds of ignorance with which the continual reading of those detestable books of chivalry had obscured it." The Yankee, the incarnation of facts, tilts with childish idealism and religious credulity and is beaten! It has been often said that "Don Quixote gave the death blow to chivalry" — a statement which carelessly overlooks the fact that chivalry never existed. The state of society of which it is the legendary picture had passed before Cervantes; and if by chivalry is meant the literary ideal, that ideal Cervantes did not kill, for it survived lustily to the nineteenth century. The Knight of La Mancha was product of a library of romance which was never read by greater numbers of people than in the past hundred years.

It may be that Cervantes *ought* to have laughed "Amadis de Gaul and all his generation" off the stage. Then we should have been spared those poor modern imitations of

a genuine old literature, those legends of paper kings and tinsel knights which Tennyson and other men of our world, having no real feeling for them, except in a half-hearted anachronistic way, could not make convincing. That Tennyson should have devoted a lifetime to a masterpiece of such flimsy stuff as the "Idyls of the King," which are not of the spirit of the age and therefore not vital, and that people should take seriously as a kingly ideal his insufferable prig of a hero, show that unfortunately Cervantes did not succeed in clarifying the English mind, whatever medicinal effect he may have had on the Spanish. Wagner used legends akin to the Arthurian for operatic purposes, and in his Ring he turned the stories into parables on modern society. One English poet, Swinburne, tried to make the Arthurian story truly tragic by adding to it, or imputing to it, a Greek fate-motive of which the old legends are quite innocent. In the hands of most other modern poets the ideals of chivalry, not being native and intensely felt, but merely admired through a misty literary haze, are both confused and feeble.

"A Connecticut Yankee" is a humourist's jest, not at any true ancient manner of thought or at any class of fairy tale, but at the falsification of history and at idiotic moonshine held up to admiration as serious story and clothed in the grave beauty of poetry. Not that Mark Twain was a conscious critic of nineteenth-century imitation romance, but like all realists he was filled with the spirit of his time, and quite without intention of making romantic poets and other sentimentalists uncomfortable, he sends the world



of terrific and really interesting facts crashing into the stage world of false moonlight and tin armour. The knights of legend, as their modern poetic champions portray them, are garrulous boobies and bullies. Their chivalric attitude toward women is a fraud that disgusts a truly chivalrous man. The sentimentalist who admires Arthur as "perfectly lovely" and who thinks it philistine to laugh at him, will never understand, of course, that Tennyson's Idyls are commonplace and the laureate himself a tedious philistine; nor will they ever understand the great realists, Molière, Fielding, Cervantes, Mark Twain. True chivalry is possible only in those who detest false chivalry. Mark Twain was a supremely chivalrous man, a man of exquisite courtesy and of beautiful loyalty to all ancient and contemporary idealisms. I have read somewhere the opinion that he was vulgar, but the unique cannot be vulgar; moreover, as Pudd'nhead Wilson says, "There are no people who are quite so vulgar as the over-refined." Clemens has also been called irreverent. He *was* disrespectful of all superstitions, including his own. Says Pudd'nhead Wilson, "Let me make the superstitions of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws or its songs either."

Mark Twain was a globe-trotter; he knew all grades and conditions of man, and he was a reader of history and biography; he was early cured of the grossest of superstitions, abject patriotism, with which all peoples are drenched and with which Americans, especially, seem to be afflicted.

"You see my kind of loyalty," says the Yankee, "was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its office-

holders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to; institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the body from winter, disease, and death. To be loyal to rags, to shout for rags, to worship rags, to die for rags — that is a loyalty of unreason, it is pure animal; it belongs to monarchy, was invented by monarchy; let monarchy keep it. I was from Connecticut, whose Constitution declares ‘that all political power is inherent in the people, and all free governments are founded on their authority and instituted for their benefit; and that they have *at all times* an undeniable and indefeasible right to *alter their form of government* in such a manner as they may think expedient.’

“Under that gospel, the citizen who thinks he sees that the commonwealth’s political clothes are worn out, and yet holds his peace and does not agitate for a new suit, is disloyal; he is a traitor. That he may be the only one who thinks he sees this decay, does not excuse him; it is his duty to agitate anyway, and it is the duty of the others to vote him down if they do not see the matter as he does.”

That is the Mark Twain who “jokingly” said that the only distinct native criminal class in America is congressmen, the Mark Twain who despairingly predicted that America, having proved that it was not capable of being truly democratic, would probably set up a monarchy in the course of another century, and who uttered as blasting an arraignment of American plutocracy as ever fell from a man’s lips.

Americans, complaisant and sentimental, do not yet know the power of Mark Twain's Swiftian attacks on our flimsy-minded patriotism and religiosity. After his death he was slandered by nice critics who purvey optimism and water to the multitude; they spoke of his "kindly wit and humour which never hurt any one." From such libel may he be defended! Some missionaries, politicians, soldiers, and priests of several churches from Rome to Huntington Avenue, Boston, will, if they have read his works, tell a different story.

Only a man whose heart is purged of counterfeit idealism can be the lofty idealist that Mark Twain was. He worshipped truth and worthy individuals dead and living. His "Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc" is a tribute to a heroine whose nobility is authentic, whose good head and good heart are proved by documents. It is an eloquent book, instinct with such reverence and passion for beauty as are possible in a soul that is not moved by hazy pieties or tricked by too easy credulity. The tone of the book is sustainedly perfect, the style excellently managed by the same imagination that holds unbrokenly true the character and diction of Huckleberry Finn. After he acknowledged the book everybody saw that he must have written it, and pointed to the obvious Mark-Twainisms, but when the story was first published anonymously, many wise critics failed to guess the authorship. In one character Mark Twain is enjoying himself in his everyday manner — in the Paladin, the comic foil, the picturesque liar whom Mark Twain likes to introduce into all human company. The episode in the Fifteenth Chapter of the Second Book, laughter in the lap

of tragedy, is one of those wrenching contrasts of human feelings such as only the Shakespeares can draw unfalteringly.

In the work of no modern prose writer is there wider range than in the work of Mark Twain — from “Huckleberry Finn” to “Joan of Arc.” He had wonderful breadth of knowledge and interest; whatever he encountered he pondered. And he seems to have turned almost every experience into a written page. When, at the end of his life, he came to write what was to be “the best and truest autobiography ever written,” he confessed in whimsical desperation that he could not tell the truth and never had told the truth, that as Pudd’nhead Wilson says, the very ink with which history is written is prejudice. He must also have found that he had already written in his other books as much of his autobiography as it was possible for him to write. His books are a record of his career from his memories of boyhood to his last travels round the world.

He wrote three more books of the desultory type of “Innocents Abroad,” and “Roughing It” — namely, “A Tramp Abroad,” “Life on the Mississippi,” and “Following the Equator.” His sketches of travel are first-rate examples of that informal sort of tourists’ essay to which in their way belong Thackeray’s “Cornhill to Cairo” and Kinglake’s “Eothen.” Of travel books there are many; of vital ones there are all too few. Those few are made by great original talkers who find something more or less apropos to say in any scene they chance to visit. “Life on the Mississippi” is the record in “the King’s English” of the country and types of life made even more surely immortal in the dialect

of "Huckleberry Finn." "Pudd'nhead Wilson," a fantastic tale, is laid on the lower Mississippi before the war. Like Mark Twain's other attempts to write a novel in conventional form, "Pudd'nhead Wilson" is not well-constructed; it succeeds by virtue of one comic character, whose "calendar" became the vehicle of Mark Twain's epigrams. As he confesses in the introduction to "Those Extraordinary Twins," he is not a born novelist; his account of his difficulty in managing a story will make any one chuckle who has ever tried to write fiction.

"The book was finished, she (Rowena) was side-tracked, and there was no possibility of crowding her in, anywhere. I could not leave her there, of course; it would not do. After spreading her out so, and making such a to-do over her affairs, it would be absolutely necessary to account to the reader for her. I thought and thought and studied and studied; but I arrived at nothing. I finally saw plainly that there was really no way but one — I must simply give her the grand bounce. It grieved me to do it, for after associating with her so much I had come to kind of like her after a fashion, notwithstanding she was such an ass and said such stupid, irritating things, and was so nauseatingly sentimental. Still it had to be done. So, at the top of Chapter XVII, I put a 'Calendar' remark concerning July the Fourth, and began the chapter with this statistic:

"Rowena went out in the back yard after supper to see the fireworks and fell down the well and got drowned."

"It seemed abrupt, but I thought maybe the reader wouldn't notice it, because I changed the subject right

away to something else. Anyway it loosened Rowena up from where she was stuck and got her out of the way and that was the main thing. It seemed a prompt good way of weeding out people that had got stalled, and a plenty good enough way for those others; so I hunted up the two boys and said, 'they went out back one night to stone the cat and fell down the well and got drowned.' Next I searched around and found old Aunt Patsy Cooper and Aunt Betsy Hale where they were aground, and said, 'they went out back one night to visit the sick and fell down the well and got drowned.' I was going to drown some of the others, but I gave up the idea partly because I believed that if I kept that up it would arouse attention, and perhaps sympathy with those people, and partly because it was not a large well and would not hold any more anyway."

Among Clemens's miscellanies are several little masterpieces, "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg," "Eve's Diary," and "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven." "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" condenses human avarice and human mendacity into a fable that says, "There you are numbered," and leaves you laughing and morally naked. Hadleyburg is a town lying on the east bank of the Mississippi River; it extends eastward to the west bank of the river.

"Eve's Diary" is a beautiful piece of poetic prose. It is a joke, of course; the absent-minded brontosaurus is there to prove it, and the respectable American librarians and library trustees, who (owing to their lack of historical knowledge) objected to Eve's costume and ruled the book



off the shelves, made the joke a perfect torture of hilarity. Nevertheless it is poetry. Eve's effort to gather the stars in a basket is such a conception as only genius is blessed with. The comedy of the sketch appeals immediately to that national calamity, American humour, which never was on earth until after the voyages of Columbus. Many Americans no doubt curl up in convulsed delight at the excruciating fun of the passage which closes the book; but a civilized man will appreciate its tender beauty.

“FORTY YEARS LATER

“It is my prayer, it is my longing, that we may pass from this life together — a longing which shall never perish from the earth, but shall have place in the heart of every wife that loves, until the end of time; and it shall be called by my name.

“But if one of us must go first, it is my prayer that it shall be I; for he is strong and I am weak, I am not so necessary to him as he is to me — life without him would not be life; how could I endure it? This prayer is also immortal, and will not cease from being offered up while my race continues. I am the first wife; and in the last wife I shall be repeated.

“AT EVE'S GRAVE

“Adam: Wheresoever she was, *there* was Eden.”

“Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven” completes the work which satire, science, and intellectual honesty have

been engaged in for over a century — it makes ultimate nonsense of the sentimentalist's Heaven.

Mark Twain's mind was of universal proportions; he meditated on all the deep problems, and somewhere in his work he touches upon most of the vital things that men commonly think about and wonder about. As he once quaintly said: "I am the only man living who understands human nature; God has put me in charge of this branch office; when I retire, there will be no one to take my place, I shall keep on doing my duty, for when I get over on the other side, I shall use my influence to have the human race drowned again, and this time drowned good, no omissions, no Ark." His was the veracity of an accurately controlled extravagance. A destroyer of false idols, he was an idolator of beauty, especially of beautiful women. He was a man of exquisite dignity, very sensitive and fine, and yet capable at seventy of fooling like a boy.

The final philosophy of this lover of boys and men and women and cats is, as he says, "a desolating doctrine." That is, it is desolating to timidity, but very brave for those who can square their shoulders and look things straight in the eye. It teaches that we have an interior Master whom our conduct must satisfy and whom nothing but good conduct will leave in peace. It eliminates all extraneous bribes to be good. It is like the religion which is preached in a work by another austere moralist — in Mr. Bernard Shaw's "The Showing-Up of Blanco Posnet." And it bears some resemblance to the humane scepticism of Mr. Thomas Hardy. Without studying or caring at all for official philosophy

(and all the wiser for the omission), Mark Twain came to a position of ethical and materialistic determinism which is rife in the thought of our time and is in one aspect as old as the Greek who said: "Character is fate." For his philosophy most readers quite properly care nothing. They care for his portrait of Mankind. And that is the greatest canvas that any American has painted.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, November 30, 1835. He died in Redding, Connecticut April 21, 1910. He never went to school after his father died, in 1847. When he was eighteen years old he wandered east for a year, supporting himself by setting type. In 1857 he became a pilot on the Mississippi. The war put an end to that occupation. His brother was appointed by Lincoln first Secretary of the new Territory of Nevada, and Clemens accompanied him as private secretary without pay. He hunted for fortune in the mines, as he narrates in "Roughing It," and found fortune in his pen in the offices of local newspapers. A quarrel with a rival editor resulted in a duel (nobody hurt), and Clemens was obliged to leave the state. He went to San Francisco and worked on the newspapers there. For one of them he made the voyage to Honolulu described in "Roughing It." In 1867 he was sent by the *Alta California* as correspondent on the voyage of the *Quaker City*; the result was "Innocents Abroad," of which a hundred thousand copies were sold the first year. For the next four years he lectured success-

fully. In 1870 he married Olivia Langdon. He bought an interest in the *Express* of Buffalo, New York, where he stayed a year. Then he moved to Hartford. In 1873 he travelled abroad and lectured in London. A later journey in 1878 bore fruit in "A Tramp Abroad." In 1885 he put his fortune and brains into the publishing house of Charles L. Webster & Company. He was the publisher — indeed, the instigator and editor — of Grant's "Memoirs," which was hugely successful. But the business failed and Clemens assumed the debts of the firm, which he paid off by a lecturing tour in 1895-96. He spent the next few years in Europe. After his return to this country he lived in New York and later at "Stormfield" in Redding, Connecticut.

His works are: *The Celebrated Jumping Frog*, 1867; *Innocents Abroad*, 1869; *Roughing It*, 1872; *The Gilded Age* (with Charles Dudley Warner), 1873; *Sketches*, 1875; *Tom Sawyer*, 1876; *Sketches*, 1878; *A Tramp Abroad*, 1880; *The Prince and the Pauper*, 1882; *The Stolen White Elephant, Etc.*, 1882; *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883; *Huckleberry Finn*, 1884; *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 1889; *Merry Tales*, 1892; *The American Claimant*, 1892; *The £1,000,000 Bank Note*, 1893; *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, 1894; *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 1894; *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, 1895; *Following the Equator*, 1897; *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, 1899; *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*, 1901; *A Double-Barrelled Detective Story*, 1902; *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, 1905; *Eve's Diary*, 1906; *Christian Science*, 1907; *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*, 1909; *Is Shakespeare Dead?*, 1909; *Speeches*, 1910.

Mark Twain's biography in three volumes is by his appointed Boswell, Mr. Albert Bigelow Paine; Mark Twain's "Autobiography" is to be published complete, it is understood, twenty-five years after his death; parts of it have appeared in the *North American Review*. Mr. Howell's "My Mark Twain" is a beautiful book. An admirable appreciation is Professor Brander Matthews's introduction to the complete edition of Mark Twain's Works. Another first-rate essay is that by Professor William Lyon Phelps in "Essays on Modern Novelists."

## CHAPTER XIV

### HOWELLS

IN 1877 the *Atlantic Monthly* gave a dinner in honour of Whittier's birthday. Mr. Howells presided. Among the honoured guests were Holmes, Longfellow, and Emerson. The lion of the party, though nobody present knew it, was Mark Twain. He told an absurd story which may be read with elucidations in the volume of his "Speeches." An account of the episode is given by Mr. Howells in "My Mark Twain." The story represents a western miner telling a stranger about three "litry cusses" who came to his cabin, and who called themselves Mr. Emerson, Mr. Longfellow, and Doctor Holmes. Mark Twain assumed that because these three distinguished old gentlemen were present at the table, in the midst of an immaculate civilization, the miner's yarn of three impossible hoboes representing themselves as Mr. Longfellow, Doctor Holmes, and Mr. Emerson, would be funny enough and would make everybody feel jolly and take another drink. An arctic chill congealed the story as it fell from Mark Twain's lips. Nobody was offended, really offended, but everybody was dismal, except the three fine old men of whom the other guests were abjectly, pitifully afraid. Literature was sensible enough, for it can always behave in a manly fashion; but the appreciation of literature,



that is, the social respect for local greatness, was so unsure of itself, so cringing and abashed by reputation, that it had no true dignity, only a Bostonian stiffness. Evidently few large-minded and easy-natured people were present at that dinner. Professor Child was not there. He read Clemens's speech next day in the newspaper and chuckled — the only human laugh known to have been evoked in all New England by Mark Twain's tragic drollery. Clemens himself, a sensitive, self-scrutinizing, gentle man, was deeply distressed, and he suffered long after he left Boston and returned to America. Mr. Howells, the toastmaster, not only felt the normal discomfort which every toastmaster feels when somebody whom "we have with us to-night" makes a fizzle, but continued for thirty-five years to deplore Mark Twain's disastrous blunder. He seems not to understand yet what happened; he does not, by his account, perceive that Mark Twain was the only young man present who behaved like a wholesome human being, and that his one mistake was in believing that he had been invited to a pleasant celebration. The occasion was really a funeral. Literature was being buried in Boston. In thirty-five years it has not been reborn there.

This little "disaster," unimportant in itself, towers like Bunker Hill monument in the literary landscape, marking the defeat of the local forces. It symbolizes the passing of an era; it is a mile-stone as well as a tomb-stone. To read the record of that dinner is to pull the lava off an intellectual Pompeii. Everything in the Boston mind is just as it was; not a thought has been engendered in any native-

born literary intellect since 1877. Old Boston stands there with the paralyzed gestures of death-in-life survival; it has not even decayed; it is simply arrested, moveless, permanent, caught just in the moment when it was putting its last loaf of literary bread into the oven. It is real bread, a little soggy with the weight of the ashes, but well baked and with a quaint lingering savour. This is old Boston. The million beings who go about the streets to-day and do the business of thriving modern Boston are a new people, like the Italians who walk above the graves of Rome; and these new Bostonians have not yet begun to make literature.

Mark Twain escaped the fall of ashes and lava and returned to the universe of nature and humanity. One other man, Mr. Howells, was rescued. Having been born in Ohio, he was in part immune against the catastrophe that overtook all thoroughgoing literary Bostonians. His American birth and training preserved him. But he has never been the man he might have been if he had not come under the enervating spell of obsolete pieties. Nature made him witty, genial, sympathetic, observant, and endowed him with an infallible ear for the rhythms of English prose. To read any of the beautiful pages of "Venetian Life" (the book in which he is nearest to being a poet, for in those days romance and youth were still a generous current in his soul) — then to read "The Flight of Pony Baker," a delicious boy's book which proves that he was incorrigibly young at sixty-five — then to read any of his twenty novels — is to get an impression of a man of rare and diversified gifts born to be one of the great interpreters of human life. But

something happened to him — he was stricken by the Dead Hand in Literature. There was in his vicinity no live literature to sustain him, to keep him in a state of courageous contemporaneity with the world about him. He fell back on the past; and even the seven or eight modern European literatures with which he is familiar are, as he speaks of them, remote, romantic, misty. He writes of Tolstoy as he writes of Jane Austen or Dante. He became the Dean of American Letters, and there was no one else on the Faculty. Huckleberry Finn ran away from school and did not go near college until Yale and Oxford played a joke under cover of the academic twilight and gave him gorgeous red gowns. Mr. Howells was very early Europeanized and Bostonized, and his Ohio outlook on life was dimmed by the fogs of tradition.

It was the letter of old Europe and old Boston, not the spirit, that assailed and clouded him. He read French fiction and admired its shapeliness, yet he caught little more from its intensity and candour than a virginal New England schoolmistress might have received. He is as innocent (and charmingly so) as his own Lydia Blood. He read Tolstoy, and he makes the amazing statement that Tolstoy had a great influence on him. One would hear with no less surprise that Hawthorne was profoundly influenced by Swift or that Jane Austen felt that she had been made over by Rabelais. There is not one trace of the influence of Tolstoy, of Tolstoy's body of thought, soul, purpose, method, power, on any page of Mr. Howells that I have read. Tolstoy's terrific sense of life does not ripple the surface of

Mr. Howells's placid unemotional work. And his essay on Tolstoy is sentimental, feminine and unimpressive.

Some one (was it Mr. George Moore?) has said that Mr. Henry James went to Paris and read Turgenev and that Mr. Howells stayed home and read Mr. James. This is malicious and probably not true as a matter of biographical fact. But it is aimed near the critical truth. The realistic novel grew up naturally from historic roots in France and in Russia. It was nurtured by a veracity of mind and a social freedom, utterly alien to the hypocrisy and the superficial optimism of America. Mr. Howells and Mr. James, alert to fine achievement, admired this great Slavic and Gallic performance and they seem to have said: "Go to! realism is the real right thing; we will be realists." They thus accepted the self-imposed limitations of realism, but they could not accept its profound privilege of telling the truth. America would not perhaps have tarred and feathered a man honest and intrepid enough to write as Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Dostoievski wrote, but it would not have permitted him to be Dean. Mr. Howells's realism is like a French play adapted for our stage; the point of the original is missed, and we wonder, as we watch the Frohmanized translation, how Frenchmen can be so dull. To take the method of realism without its substance, without its integrity to the bolder passions, results in a work precise in form and excellently finished, but narrow in outlook and shallow. Hamlet and the King's crime are both left out.

Mr. Howells, with no American but Mr. James to invigorate him by contest or support him by intelligent coöperation,

got into a *cul-de-sac*; it looked like the way to a new country, but the way was barred. As a critic, he became the lone argumentative voice of a realism which he could not practise; he could not in his novels illustrate his conviction, or make clear what the issue is.

The issue may be stated roughly as follows: Fiction is a poetic imitation of biography. It makes the magnificent assumption that its characters are real people and proceeds to tell a part of their lives. In order to maintain this primary assumption, it must do one of two things: either it must make events so entertaining that no one cares to question the reality of the people (as when Achilles slays Hector or Dido pines for Aeneas); or it must make the people so real, so verisimilar, that no one dares to question their reality. Romance does the first of these two things; the kiss of the fairy prince is so delicious that no one asks whether there ever was a fairy prince. Realism does the other thing. It says that its people are true and are interesting because they are true. Truth cannot go wrong; it must hold the attention of intelligent minds, and as for unintelligent minds, they may devote themselves to bridge-whist and comic operas. But having thrown down the gauntlet to falsehood and unlife-like invention, Realism immediately puts itself under obligation to deal with the whole truth so far as artistic proportions allow; it cannot slink behind timid suppressions and reservations and still hope to win in its contest with Romance. It cannot play with its left hand tied behind its back. To the reader of fatuous romance, Realism says: "Life is more interesting than that; read this; it is about

life." And it must offer something really richer and more interesting; it must offer Tolstoy or Balzac.

What if it offers "A Modern Instance?" It loses its case at once. Instead of demonstrating that life is interesting, that the commonplace is uncommonly interesting if you get under it and understand it, "A Modern Instance" demonstrates with fine precision that life is not interesting to the people that live it and that the commonplace is just as commonplace as the romantic had always supposed it to be. Living people, common or extraordinary, have passions. "A Modern Instance" is passionless. The people in it, with the exception of Squire Gaylord, are not so profoundly moved that the reader catches the contagion of *their* feelings and *their* interests. Mr. Howells's realism, proclaiming the identity of life and literature (and his critical essays proclaim the same truth many times and in admirable manner), leaves the great things in life out. If there were no more passion in the world than Mr. Howells recognizes and portrays, about eighty million of us Americans would never have been born, and, once born, half of us would have died of ennui.

Mr. Howells says somewhere that he cares only for the thing, common or uncommon, that reveals its intrinsic poetry. That is a right attitude, but it is not the attitude of Mr. Howells's novels, for he is not a poet, as Meredith and Hardy and Flaubert are poets. He strips life not only of its false romance but of its true romance. True realism imaginatively understands the romantic feelings of people in ordinary daylight circumstances. A sworn champion



of theatric and juvenile romance, like Stevenson, does not need to be argued into liking the great realists, Fielding or Balzac; he takes to them naturally because they are rich and humane, because they too are men of fancy and see that life is full of terrific tragedies and adventurous comedies. Mr. Howells, narrow in his convictions and timid in his handling of the very passions which make great realistic novels, tilts his lance against Stevenson and other men of exuberant fancy and thinks he is fighting the battle of honest fiction. He is not, and the net result of his critical writings and his novels is to turn the battle against himself. Seldom in his books does he come to grips with a terrible motive or heart-tearing ecstasy — and people have those motives and those ecstasies in real life.

In "A Modern Instance," Bartley and Marcia are under-motived. Bartley goes to the dogs in a true enough way, but his beer and his fat are not impressive signs or causes of the disintegration of a weak soul. The fat is a pathological fact not at all alien to the noblest character, and he does not drink enough in all his recorded career to make an ordinary man drunk for more than a day or two. What is the to-do all about? The probable explanation is that, as Theodore Hook said of Wordsworth, Mr. Howells's "conceptions of inebriation were no doubt extremely limited." The degeneration of Hubbard's character, which was poor to start with, is sanely probable; it is not *inevitable* seen in the light of what the author gives you. One is forced to remember that Mr. Howells was brought up in a community where we were taught in school that to smoke

O.K. 11-11-
cigarettes was the beginning of the road to the gallows; and all the time we were smoking clay pipes out behind the barn. Marcia Hubbard must have suffered intensely; her jealousy is a real tragic motive, but nothing is made of it; her jealousy does not torture us, as does the jealousy of the man in Tolstoy's "Kreutzer Sonata." Her story is plain as daylight, for Mr. Howells is a master of clear, self-evident narrative, but there is nothing under it. One can read her story over and over again without a qualm of sympathy, with not an instant of that vital contact, that emotional identity which is the reader's great experience in great novels. She is removed from the book on a pair of tongs held by the amiable and delightful Atherton and Clara Kingsbury. And we do not care a straw what became of her. The novelist's business is to make us feel that this poor, ignorant, vulgar, jealous girl is tremendously interesting as a victim of herself, even if she has not an intensely interesting personality. Halleck, too, must have had acute feelings. But all one can remember of him is that he was lame, and was sorry he did not go to Harvard, and that Bartley owed him money. Squire Gaylord has the makings of a great character. He is a real man, he has a deep fundamental emotion. The description of him is excellent, unforgettable; his face looks out of the page. But his tragic climax in the court room somehow does not come off. The shrewd pain of the old man, which the recorded events show he must have experienced, is simply not in the book.

"A Modern Instance" is the best of those novels of Mr. Howells which approach tragedy. It is a good novel, an

important novel, but it is not great because the tragic motives are not realized. Its failure is not due to the fact that the characters are "sordid and commonplace," as foolish sentimentalists say about all the great ones from Balzac to Zola. Sordid and commonplace people, such as most of us are, have experiences as abysmally tragic, are damned with as acute capacities for suffering, as my Lord Hamlet. Geniuses like Dostoievski and a certain Victorian novelist named Dickens, whom Mr. Howells is reported not to admire, search out the heart of the very august tragedies in the breasts of ordinary folks and represent them so vividly that it is impossible to be indifferent to their histories. Ordinary persons in real life do extraordinarily interesting things, they have wondrously vivid sensations of commonplace events. Modern novelists have discovered how highly organized is the nervous system of a duffer, how lacerating are his grief and joy; they have also discovered how many interesting things common men do in the course of a day's work. Mr. Howells does not get at all this, because he does not know people and their day's work; he has seen them from his front window and in parlours, offices and summer hotels. Or he is imaginatively unable to grasp those great moments in the soul (great to the experiencing, if not to the observing, soul) — those moments which make the person whom the soul inhabits act in absorbingly interesting ways. Either Mr. Howells cannot or he dare not speak out about life. So that as the solitary, devoted protagonist of realism in these romantic United States he has been curiously ineffectual.

Is he not, after all, a feminine, delicate, slightly romantic genius, theoretically convinced that realism is "the thing," but not equipped with the skill and experience to practise it? Seeing that Tolstoy writes of social problems and the people, he would forthwith do likewise, but he does not understand social problems and the people. In short, he does not know life. He would not know how to sit down and eat his grub with a bunch of workmen and find out what they think of things. Yet, theoretically, avowedly, he is all on their side of the social battle. To any one who has read the literature, not the polite literature, but the daily and the documentary literature of social movements, Mr. Howells's "Altruria" seems like the sentimentalism of a benevolent man, a very fine vision excellently expressed by one who would like to see the social world better but does not know the structure of the social world. A recent paper by Mr. Howells on war shows an astonishing oblivion of all that has been written about the causes of war. He lays a gentle hand on belligerent men, and says, "This is not nice and humane." He says it for six or seven very fine pages, and the impression is as if an excellent, sincere, dreamy clergyman should accost a girl of the streets and say: "Dear, dear, a fallen woman, too bad. Cannot something be done?"

In "Annie Kilburn" some well-to-do people set out to "help" the poor. The point of the story is that they do not know anything about the poor and do not really sympathize with humanity. Mr. Howells is sympathetic and he understands the false point of view of the people in comfortable circumstances. But he unconsciously reveals his

own ignorance of the very people whom Annie Kilburn is supposed to wish to help. He does not portray them; he does not take us into their houses. A Russian or a Frenchman or one of the younger English novelists, Mr. Wells, Mr. Galsworthy or Mr. Bennett, would have us eating dinner with one of the workmen by the third or fourth chapter, and we should know what is thought and felt by the kind of man whom Annie Kilburn is trying to understand. We should see the social contrasts dramatized. Mr. Howells's sympathies, principles, methods, are modern, advanced, emancipated. His knowledge of things and people is as restricted as that of the *New York Nation* or the *Saturday Review*. Life may be a tempest in a teapot. If it is, Mr. Howells is one of its finest and most faithful recorders. But he puts the emphasis on the teapot and not on the tempest, which is hardly consonant with his often restated, almost militant declaration that literature is life. He sees things from a distance; he is a sketcher, a very delicate farceur, a war correspondent who has never been in range of the bullets.

The foregoing negations oversay themselves, unless it is understood that Mr. Howells takes literature with tragic seriousness and that he handles other authors in a very strict and schoolmasterly fashion; so that he is fairly to be judged by his own severe standards of what is worth while in fiction. In his book "*My Literary Passions*" ("passions" there is the only case in all his work of a misused word), and in his pronouncements from "*The Easy Chair*" and other seats of critical judgment he has been plain and direct,

for all his mild manners and unapproachable tact, in his abuse of some very great writers. Moreover, the negations that are here somewhat awkwardly set down are valid, only on the hypothesis that we are discussing a man of genius, a man worth discussing, and are trying to say why an important, capable novelist is not a great one. Within his limits he is a perfect artist. His slender comedies are without a blemish. He never wrote a bad page, never wrote a sentence that any one else could make better. Mark Twain has expressed his merit with vigorous justice:

“For forty years his English has been to me a continual delight and astonishment. In the sustained exhibition of certain great qualities — clearness, compression, verbal exactness, and unforced and seemingly unconscious felicity of phrasing — he is, in my belief, without his peer in the English-writing world. *Sustained*. I intrench myself behind that protecting word. There are others who exhibit these great qualities as greatly as does he, but only by intervalled distributions of rich moonlight, with stretches of veiled and dimmer landscape between; whereas Howells’s moon sails cloudless skies all night and all the nights. In the matter of verbal exactness Mr. Howells has no superior, I suppose. He seems to be always able to find that elusive and shifty grain of gold, the *right word*. . . . And where does he get the easy and effortless flow of his speech? and its cadenced and undulating rhythm? and its architectural felicities of construction, its graces of expression, its pemmican quality of compression, and all that? Born to him, no doubt. All in shining good order in the beginning, all extraordinary;



and all just as shining, just as extraordinary to-day, after forty years of diligent wear and tear and use. . . . As concerns his humour, I will not try to say anything, yet I would try if I had the words that might approximately reach up to its high place. I do not think any one else can play with humorous fancies so gracefully and delicately and deliciously as he does, nor has so many to play with, nor can come so near making them look as if they were doing the playing themselves and he was not aware that they were at it. For they are unobtrusive, and quiet in their ways, and well conducted. His is a humour which flows softly all around about and over and through the mesh of the page, pervasive, refreshing, health-giving, and makes no more show and no more noise than does the circulation of the blood."

If in his many books Mr. Howells has not had a great deal to say that is significant, he has said everything he meant in an unimprovable manner. There are secondary writers who have no influence on our thinking, whose wisdom is not profound, whose ideas we do not vividly recall, for example Addison, Hawthorne, Pater. But any one with a sense of literary craftsmanship can read them with pleasure, reread them with increasing admiration. Such a writer is Howells. Even when his story is not quite compelling, his writing fascinates; it is a joy to watch him manœuvre the English language.

As a writer of superficial, delicate comedy he is unsurpassed. "The Lady of the Aroostook" is faultless. The surface of it shimmers — and it is all surface. It is one of those stories

in which American "life" is contrasted with European "life," but to put it so is to strain its sheer fabric. The international differences are played with in a deft light-handed way, and there is no assumption, as there is in the graver and richer novels of Mr. Henry James, that national ways and habits are being profoundly studied. "The Lady of the Aroostook" groups itself in the pleasantest corner of the reader's memory with the novels of Jane Austen and "Cranford." Matthew Arnold's exclamatory acceptance of it as a "specimen of your New England life" is a characteristic naïveté on the part of one who was forever preaching the need of insight and proportion and the danger of pressing too heavily on merely literary evidence! There is more of New England life in one of Mrs. Wilkins-Freeman's short stories than in any of Howells's novels.

Mr. Howells observes life; he is not actually or imaginatively of it. His best comments are objective, pleasantly disdainful; from his point of view in a corner of a gallery overlooking the human scene he touches lightly a trick of character and illustrates an unobtrusively neat generality with a trivial action or gesture. He has amazing skill in making conversation clever, but not too clever to be apt on the lips of the postulated character. This skill is constant in his early comedies, "The Lady of the Aroostook," "April Hopes" and "Silas Lapham" and it is undiminished in "The Kentons," written years later. Nor is it much less evident in those novels which are supposed to belong to a different manner, such as "The Quality of Mercy"; for though Mr. Howells's outlook on life may have undergone

radical changes, the texture of his work is much the same for forty years. He very early discovered a fine, definite narrow gift, and he has employed the gift with unflagging conscience and industry. There is nothing better of its kind than the ball scene in "April Hopes" where Mrs. Brinkley and Corey talk about themselves and Boston. There is nothing better than a half-dozen scenes in "The Kentons," the conversations on the steamer, especially those in which one end is held up by Boyne Kenton, who is certainly the best boy ever put into a grown-up novel, except Clara Middleton's friend Crossjay.

Mr. Howells's books are of such even excellence that perhaps none is unquestionably best, but one vote is cast herewith for "The Kentons." There Mr. Howells is getting back home. He knows the Ohio state of mind; at least — since there may be no Ohio state of mind — he knows that one Ohio family, and it is an excellent family, in itself as a collection of human beings and in its artistic entity as a novelist's creation. Bittredge is a sort of middle-western Bartley Hubbard, but he is much better drawn than the other journalistic bounder. As for the girls, they are a little more warmly and humanely handled than some of the other young people whose love affairs Mr. Howells has graciously sketched. The suffering of the elder daughter is quite poignant and moving. On the whole Mr. Howells's treatment of young people in love is refreshing in a world full of novels the chief object of which is to get a man and a girl eagerly into each other's arms on the last page; there is a slight acidity in his management of youthful

matings which makes for sanity and never becomes so sharp as to be unkindly or the least cynical. The grand passions, sexual or other, he does not draw and seldom attempts to draw; therefore he has never written a great novel.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William Dean Howells was born at Martin's Ferry, Ohio, March 1, 1837. He was educated in his father's newspaper office as compositor and journalist. He wrote a campaign life of Lincoln, for which he was appointed Consul at Venice, where he lived from 1861 to 1865. For the next six years he was associate editor of the *New York Nation*. From 1872 to 1881 he was editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Since 1886 he has been on the staff of *Harper's Magazine*. He was married in 1862 to Elinor G. Mead.

Some of his books are: *Poems of Two Friends* (with J. J. Piatt), 1860; *Life of Lincoln*, 1860; *Venetian Life*, 1866; *Italian Journeys*, 1867; *No Love Lost*, 1869; *Suburban Sketches*, 1871; *Their Wedding Journey*, 1871; *Poems*, 1873; *A Chance Acquaintance*, 1873; *A Foregone Conclusion*, 1874; *Out of the Question*, 1877; *Life of Rutherford B. Hayes*, 1877; *A Counterfeit Presentment*, 1877; *The Lady of the Aroostook*, 1879; *The Undiscovered Country*, 1880; *A Fearful Responsibility*, 1881; *Doctor Breen's Practice*, 1881; *A Modern Instance*, 1882; *A Woman's Reason*, 1883; *A Little Girl Among the Old Masters*, 1883; *Three Villages*, 1884; *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, 1885; *Tuscan Cities*, 1885; *The Minister's Charge*, 1886; *Indian Summer*, 1886; *Modern Italian Poets*, 1887; *April Hopes*, 1887; *Annie Kilburn*, 1888; *A*

Hazard of New Fortunes, 1889; The Shadow of a Dream, 1890; A Boy's Town, 1890; An Imperative Duty, 1891; The World of Chance, 1893; The Coast of Bohemia, 1893; A Traveller from Altruria, 1894; My Literary Passions, 1895; Stops of Various Quills, 1895; Impressions and Experiences, 1896; An Open-Eyed Conspiracy, 1897; Ragged Lady, 1899; Their Silver Wedding Journey, 1899; Literary Friends and Acquaintance, 1900; Heroines of Fiction, 1901; The Kentons, 1902; Literature and Life, 1902; The Flight of Pony Baker, 1902; Questionable Shapes, 1903; Letters Home, 1903; Miss Bellard's Inspiration, 1905; London Films, 1905; Certain Delightful English Towns, 1906; Between the Dark and the Daylight, 1907; Through the Eye of the Needle, 1907; The Mother and the Father, 1909; Seven English Cities, 1909; My Mark Twain, 1910.

Mr. Howells is happily living, so that no one has yet written his biography. The only good essays about him that I have seen are one by John M. Robertson in "Essays Toward a Critical Method," and one by Mark Twain in *Harper's Magazine* for July, 1906.

## CHAPTER XV

### WILLIAM JAMES

WILLIAM JAMES was one of three or four important American men of letters of his generation; and it is as man of letters and human being, not as technical philosopher, that we shall discuss him here. To be sure, the professional and the literary aspects of this multitudinously gifted man are not to be completely separated. So far as a maker of books is identified with a limited subject, he must be judged by the standards special to that subject; and James was a philosopher; he wrote little outside metaphysics and psychology; not to discuss him as philosopher would be to neglect his chief importance. But when a writer by virtue of his personality stands forth from the technicalities of his subject and captures imaginations that are not wont to dwell in the special field where he labours, he becomes a man of letters. And the man of letters survives after the philosopher has been tucked away in museums, universities and other preservative institutions.

It is sometimes the case that the lesser philosopher is the greater man of letters, or that the untechnical aspects or portions of a philosopher's work most broadly secure his immortality. Schopenhauer compels admiration from flroid optimists and from idle readers of literature who care nothing



for his fundamental theories; whereas Kant, assumed to be a greater philosopher than Schopenhauer, exhausted every resource of human thought and the German language to discourage people from reading him. It is certainly not Plato's metaphysics, but the portrait of Socrates, the poetic, fanciful talk of the master and the young men, which outlive the centuries. If the Absolute should open its thin lips and declare all James's philosophy null and void, James would march prospering just the same, overriding with his cavalry charges of living illustration all the inhibitions of philosophy or any creature thereof.

"It is high time," he says, "to urge the use of a little imagination in philosophy." He used not little but much. He has the **vision**, the fertility, the abundance of analogy which he ascribes to Fechner and which he says professorial philosophers usually lack. Systems die, but vision is imperishable. Poets speak with still living voices long after their private beliefs and religions have become dead issues. Transcendentalism is deader than Marley's ghost, but Emerson is not dead. "Pragmatism" may become a dead issue. But the great expounder of it has embedded its principles in vital matter, less ephemeral, less transitory than the stuff of many famous books of philosophy. Every theory, every article of faith which James declared, grew out of the soil of life and was fostered by the most opulent and incandescent imagination among Americans of the generation that is now at three-score years and ten. There is only one other of William James's stature and originality — Mark Twain. Even the fine novelists, Mr.

Howells and Mr. Henry James, are not the human equals of those two.

In all departments of life which he touched William James was a liberator, a champion of human rights and the privileges of the spirit, a redeemer of his age from stupidity and commonplaceness and intellectual tyranny. He was of the few who reclaimed the arid desert which American literature had been since the passing of their fathers' generation. He redeemed philosophy from rigid and jejune abstraction, made it alive for living people, and tried to make living people alive to philosophy. He was one of a small band who redeemed the "humanistic" departments of Harvard University from the sterility and impotence into which they had fallen during the past twenty-five years. The teacher, the philosopher, the man of letters — does he seem to shine the more brilliantly in all three capacities because he had so little competition in his immediate environment? — because great teachers do not as a rule live in university communities, because philosophers do not live in the midst of life, and men of letters contemporary with James almost unanimously refused to be born in these United States?

He was a great teacher in a university where (a dozen years ago, surely) great teachers were few. In the non-scientific departments there was Norton, a survival from a generation that read literature and knew not Ph. D's. There was also one teacher of literature whose merited popularity with his students vainly clamoured in administrative ears for official recognition, which is even now incompletely accorded. And there was the department of philosophy.

These were the only men who produced anything like literature, who could do that which they presumed to teach. In his "Talks to Teachers" James says with mild irony that all we need to do now is to impregnate our organized education with geniuses; he well knew that genius or even a conspicuous talent is the most serious disqualification with which a man can be burdened if he wishes to teach in an American school. In his sketch of Thomas Davidson, who might have added lustre to Harvard had the authorities willed to receive him into the faculty, James protests against the disposition of university officials to reject men of ability in favour of routine professors. The reason, of course, is that routine professors are already in charge and they cannot endure the rivalry of first-rate intellects. The sections of the Harvard faculty which deal with art and letters, those departments which should have a great civilizing influence, which should inspire young men with poetry and beauty and feed their imaginations, have all been benighted in routine, save only the department of philosophy, Palmer, Royce, Santayana and James. It alone is impregnated with genius; its members write significant books. To a small group of men, and to James especially, is due the spiritual salvation of Harvard (or as much of Harvard as the faculty constitutes) during an administration which was hostile to a good deal that is important in education, an administration the more discouraging because so servilely praised. A true disciple of James should hasten to add that Harvard has not been guilty of any unique individual stupidity, for our master tells us that "most human institutions, by the purely

technical and professional manner in which they come to be administered, end by becoming obstacles to the very purposes which their founders had in view."

James's "Talks to Teachers" is one of those rare manuals of advice whose precepts the counsellor himself put into practice. He treated his pupils as human beings. He assumed them to be intelligent gentlemen, and by this assumption — it illustrates one of the principles of his psychology — he helped them to be so. Their views and interests were to him not juvenile inferiorities to which gowned wisdom graciously condescended; they were equal democratic human stuff, valuable to the man who sat on the other side of the desk, for he was a real philosopher of the race of Socrates. "In a subject like philosophy," he says, "it is really fatal to lose connection with the open air of human nature, and to think in terms of shop tradition only." He talked to his classes as man to man, urbane, gracious, witty, and withal vastly learned. He unrolled his wisdom without pretension, and without the wrong kind of reservation; to use his own words, he forgot scruples, took the brake off his heart, and let his tongue wag.

The writer remembers one little accident that resulted from his off-hand liberal way of talking philosophy. The subject was a volume of metaphysical theology, a wise but rather dull book, in which the author had mingled together his traditional deity and an abstraction as shapeless as a cloud, and less substantial, consisting of the Babu words of philosophy. In the thicket of words some of us were resignedly losing ourselves and we expected to be lost throughout

the course. But after a lecture or two of preliminaries the thicket became alive, vistas opened, not toward the Absolute to which the book was driving, but to all manner of lighted clearings and glades of intelligence. The discourses were unmethodical, colloquial, yet the method of a mind that had already thought out most of the things discussed in the book soon became evident. The papery attributes of the figment in the text-book were peeled off one after another and thrown into the waste-basket. One day, with his delightful mixture of alertness and nonchalance, James was reducing a word to its meanings, trying to find the heart of it by pulling away some of its connotations. There was no heart in it. One student, who had not quite followed the game and still mistook the faceless abstraction for the god of his fathers, grew aghast at the process of verbal denudation and cried out, "But I do not see how that takes away my God."

Professor James paused for a puzzled moment and then replied, "It doesn't. Your God stands on his own hind legs." Then he pursued the idea, often found in his books, that the metaphysical Absolute is like an anatomist's manikin. It can be taken apart and put together; it may be a useful diagram of a living being, but it is itself dead.

Since he permitted himself such homely metaphors (indeed, he took pleasure in a slang trope, politely apologizing for its vulgarity), one may say that his philosophy stands on its own hind legs. And he left standing room for other men's convictions. He respected what stands alone, and was suspicious of artificial props. Exuberant foe of all ghostly abstractions and of reasons that smack of intellectual

dishonesty, he deferred humbly to the faiths and feelings of men. He was a learner at the feet of life and in that attitude he kept his students. But to represent him so (the words are at fault) savours of a sort of pious solemnity quite foreign to his spirit of animated discursive inquiry. Most often he took his students on holiday explorations, and in the midst of an intellectual picnic he turned poet and prophet and spoke with an eloquence which no man less than a genius can approach.

When his discourses take shape in print they retain their colloquial informality and gain heightened power from compression and rearrangement. His "Psychology," however solid a text-book it may be, is really a series of literary essays. If the chapter on Habit were bound in a volume of Stevenson or Emerson, it might surprise us there, but it would not be inharmonious with its surroundings. Other philosophers talk of previous philosophers and of such ancient literature as has become respectable and dignified. James refers abundantly to modern poets and essayists, Whitman, Richard Jefferies, Edward Carpenter, Swinburne, Tennyson, Tolstoy, James Thomson, Thackeray, Chesterton and H. G. Wells. Some psychologists throw life into rigid cold shadows cast by an artificial light; James views the world in the sunlight of nature which overflows and streams beyond the shadow-casting facts.

His "Varieties of Religious Experience" is an anthology of poetry and biography, a study not of theologies, but of human beings; there is something capaciously tolerant about the book, as if the mind that made it were large enough to



understand and value any sort of man, even though candour flatly rejected his religion. In "Pragmatism" and "The Meaning of Truth" and "A Pluralistic Universe," where he is fighting a dexterous and exhilarating battle, James is dignified and dead in earnest, yet capable of hearty laughter. "My failure," he says, "in making converts to my conception of truth seems . . . almost complete. An ordinary philosopher would feel disheartened, and a common choleric sinner would curse God and die!" Whether or not one is converted to his conception, it is impossible not to be converted to the man. "What we enjoy most in a Huxley or a Clifford," he says, "is not the professor with his learning, but the human personality ready to go in for what it feels to be right in spite of all appearances."

Much of James's work is a war of words — that is, a war of life against words. For this task no man was ever better fitted. They who would "nip" Pragmatism "in the bud" (an operation which one critic regards as the present duty of philosophy) must choose sharp, hard weapons lest the assaulting edges be nicked on the steel they encounter. James outstrips all his rivals in his power over language, language professional and colloquial, diurnal and traditional. If there be reason in the old idea that clarity of statement is proof of truth, he is unassailably true. He has defined himself in his account of Bergson.

"If anything can make hard things easy to follow it is a style like Bergson's. A 'straightforward' style, an American reviewer lately called it; failing to see that such straightforwardness means a flexibility of verbal resource that fol-

lows the thought without crease or wrinkle, as elastic underclothing follows the movements of one's body. The lucidity of Bergson's way of putting things . . . seduces you and bribes you in advance to become his disciple. It is a miracle, and he is a real magician."

James, too, is straightforward, rapid, luminous; moreover, he has a humour rare in philosophers, a whimsical, wayward style of sliding round venerable monuments of superstition, a variety and adaptability not only to his argumentative purpose, but to the moods of human beings. The expositor writes at his subject; the man of letters writes at living persons. James strikes like a poet at the middle of your nature and discovers, what only the man of sympathy can give you courage to feel, that the avenues of approach to your centre of intelligence are populous with ideas. No doubt his eloquence is a consolation to his opponents, who will take refuge in the inhuman notion that true wisdom is dull and that beauty is meretricious. But James has himself swept away the classroom fallacy that stupidity of expression is a warrant of philosophic profundity. His chapter on Hegel in "A Pluralistic Universe" is a declaration of independence, one article of which relates to the question of style. "There seems something grotesque and *saugrenu* in the pretension of a style so disobedient to the first rules of sound communication between minds to be the authentic mother-tongue of reason."

James is a master of words, and his mastery has fitted him to clear away some towering structures that forbade a free passage to the open country. He has pierced many frowning

champions and found them, like the formidable knight of Arthurian legend, to hold but a weak boy inside the shining accoutrement. He knew the core and fringes of terms and was not to be deceived by the fallacies involved in them. He delighted to shake a philosophic word and make it give up its meaning or give up the ghost. Too many words, he thought, gave up nothing but ghosts. He liked to strip a phrase of its ancestral respectability, to wipe off its satelitious splendours, send it into a fight with life, and see it come back bruised and faint. He enjoyed pulling a formulated solemnity from its precarious one-sided attachment to a metaphysical edifice and then scrutinizing the fragments. But he was destructive only in the interests of clarity and honesty. The superficial mistook his dexterity and lightness of heart for frivolity. His ready metaphor about the "cash value" of an idea has even been so far debased by a foreign critic as to be used in proof of the commercialism of America! As he cries, "Oh, for the rarity of ordinary secular intelligence!" James destroyed sanctified verbalisms because he distrusted the impositions of mere words. His main interest was not words, but life. To the ordinary inquisitive mind philosophy is a region of spectres and vapours; it is not full of substantial things. James strides out of the misty bog to the shining uplands of human life. He knew the world. He was a man of sound information, a biologist, a reader of contemporary writings and contemporary events. When he spoke of political and moral problems it was not from an academic twilight, but from the highway where he walked with other men.

In our time we are losing respect for ordinate authority. We expect the philosopher and other leaders of thought to make good. James called upon himself and his colleagues to give an account of themselves not only as professors, but as men. "Humbug is humbug," he says, "even though it bear the scientific name." That confession is one that the common citizen has been demanding for a long time. We are suspicious of what James calls "the common herd of philosophic scribes." It was time we had a professor whose pages should glow with sincerity; it was high time, especially in New England universities, that the grand lamas of learning should be made to realize that they live in our world, that they cannot withdraw to the lofty remoteness of Thibet, however much they may prefer the climate. We are beginning to count the cost of the inefficient church and the inefficient university. We are trying to clear our shoddy and cotton skirts (which inefficient statesmanship sells to us at all-wool prices) from the briars of bewilderment; we are striving to find a way out to things that matter, to make our lives and schools and governments better. In this struggle James was a liberator. He justified his academic tribe. As he jokingly says, he tried to earn his salary as a full professor. He was impatient with the nonsense of his class because he had sympathy for other classes. He did not try to allay, but vigorously stirred the ferment of rebellion which is boiling over the walls of institutionalism in all parts of the world.

Mark Twain has been mentioned in this chapter, partly for the pleasure of imagining the shock which the association

of the two men might give to critical souls, but chiefly because the association is just. They are the two splendid figures in the pitifully small number of American humanists of their generation. They both had heart and humour and eloquence and humanity.\*

It is usual to speak of Mark Twain as a "philosopher" in the popular sense of the word. Professional philosophers ignore that sense. But James did not ignore it; he valued it and bade his colleagues relate their philosophies to popular meanings, to the experiences of common humanity. Our universities cannot be wholly useless when a college professor, a lecturer upon abstruse problems, can write as James wrote in 1899 in the preface of his "Talks to Teachers":

"The practical consequence of such a philosophy (the belief that the facts and worth of life need many cognizers to take them in) is the well-known democratic respect for the sacredness of individuality — is, at any rate, the outward tolerance of whatever is not itself intolerant. These phrases are so familiar that they sound now rather dead in our ears. Once they had a passionate inner meaning. Such a passionate inner meaning they may easily acquire again if the

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\*It may not be indiscreet to give in a footnote an example of James's wholesouled manner of recognizing contemporary idealisms, of his readiness to throw scholarly apparatus overboard and go straight to essential truth. There has been much psychological, and much pseudo-psychological, discussion of Miss Helen Keller. Professor James wrote to her in praise of one of her books. After some lively compliments about her "psychology" and her literary gifts, he said: "The sum of it is that you're a blessing, and I'll kill any one that says you're not!" Lest the reader far from Boston may take this for granted and say, "Of course; she was at Radcliffe, he was a Harvard professor, and Harvard professors must necessarily have been enthusiastic about this wonderful student" I may add that in this James seems to be as much an exception to the temper of official Cambridge as he was an exception in many other significant things.

pretension of our nation to inflict its own inner ideals and institutions *vi et armis* upon Orientals should meet with a resistance as obdurate as so far it has been gallant and spirited. Religiously and philosophically, our national doctrine of live and let live may prove to have a far deeper meaning than our people now seem to imagine it to possess."

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William James was born in New York City, January 11, 1842. He died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, August 26, 1910. His father was Henry James, the Swedenborgian writer. Mr. Henry James, the novelist, is his brother. He studied at the Lawrence Scientific School and graduated from the Harvard Medical School in 1869. He taught at Harvard from 1872 to 1907, as instructor in physiology and anatomy, then as professor of philosophy and psychology. He gave the Gifford lectures at Edinburgh 1899-1911, and the Hibbert lectures at Oxford in 1908. In 1878 he married Alice H. Gibbens.

His works are: *Principles of Psychology*, 1890; *Psychology — Briefer Course*, 1892; *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1897; *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Life's Ideals*, 1898; *Human Immortality — Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine*, 1899; *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902; *Pragmatism — A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 1907; *A Pluralistic Universe*, 1908; *The Meaning of Truth*, 1909; *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 1911; *Memories and Studies*, 1911; *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, 1912.



## CHAPTER XVI

### LANIER

THREE volumes of unimpeachable poetry have been written in America: "Leaves of Grass," the thin volume of Poe, and the poetry of Sidney Lanier. It is treading on treacherous negatives to say that there is not a fourth fit for their society; yet I believe that to make an adequate fourth one would have to assemble in an anthology the finest poems from lesser lyrists, beginning, perhaps, with Bryant's "Water Fowl" and including, if not ending with, the remarkable poem published only last year, "The Singing Man," by Josephine Preston Peabody (Mrs. Marks). And a beautiful book that anthology would be, for it would contain Freneau's "Wild Honey Suckle," Parson's "On a Bust of Dante," and "Dirge for One Who Fell in Battle," Timrod's "Cotton Boll," Stedman's "John Brown" and "Helen Keller," Aldrich's "Fredericksburg" and "Identity," Sill's "The Fool's Prayer," Gilder's sonnet "On the Life Mask of Lincoln," a score of marvellous little poems by Father Tabb, James Whitcomb Riley's "South Wind and the Sun," Emma Lazarus's "Venus of the Louvre," L. F. Tooker's "The Last Fight," a dozen lyrics of Richard Hovey, William Vaughn Moody's "Gloucester Moors," four or five poems by Edwin Arlington Robinson, and some other verse drawn

from the younger rather than the elder poets. Surely it would be a fragrant cluster from many gardens whose beauty is a splendid and consoling denial that the race of singers is dead or shall ever die till man dies. If this anthology, made of poets who are somewhat invidiously and with wavering justice of phrase called minor, were ranked on our shelves with the complete works of American poets, what single light could shine undiminished by the rivalry of the chosen cluster of perfection? Not Longfellow, nor Whittier, nor Holmes, nor Lowell, but only these three — Poe, Whitman, Lanier.

Lanier was a poet, always, continuously, even in his juvenile verses, and his genius was unerringly self-recognized before the bitter exigencies of his life permitted him to announce himself and to prove his modestly proud conviction. No poet's lot, except Poe's, ever fell in rugged places; no poet, except Poe, was so alone and self-directed. A letter written when he was thirty-three to Bayard Taylor sets forth the aridity of his life. "I could never describe to you what a mere drought and famine my life has been as regards that multitude of matters which I fancy one absorbs when one is in an atmosphere of art, or when one is in conversational relation with men of letters, with travellers, with persons who have either seen, or written, or done large things. Perhaps you know that, with us of the younger generation in the South since the war, pretty much the whole of life has been merely not dying."

To his father he writes: "My dear father, think how, for twenty years, through poverty, through pain, through

Difficulties  
faced.

weariness, through sickness, through the uncongenial atmosphere of a farcical college and of a bare army and then of an exacting business life, through all the discouragement of being wholly unacquainted with literary people and literary ways — I say, think how, in spite of all these depressing circumstances, and of a thousand more which I could enumerate, these two figures of music and poetry have steadily kept in my heart so that I could not banish them."

These letters are a sad commentary on America (not that poets have not been lonely and discouraged in other countries), for they not only reveal a war-wasted South, but remind us how very little Lanier missed at that date in not being associated with the men of letters of New York and New England. The man he writes to, like an outsider yearning for good company, is Bayard Taylor, a first-rate man but a fourth-rate *littérateur*. The friendliness of Baltimore finally gave him much that he needed, and wonder of wonders! Johns Hopkins University made him instructor in literature; the new young college thought a true poet worthy to teach literature and helped a true poet to live.

Lanier flourished alone, and taught himself all that he knew of books and poetry. Indeed he learned without a teacher to play the flute so well that he could support himself by playing in the orchestra at Baltimore, and was pronounced by professional musicians a distinguished player. In a somewhat florid but evidently sincere memorial the leader of the orchestra said: "I will never forget the impression he made on me when he played the flute-concerto

Sold  
tough  
in  
literary  
music

of Emil Hartmann at a Peabody symphony concert in 1878: his tall, handsome, manly presence, his flute breathing noble sorrows, noble joys, the orchestra softly responding. The audience was spellbound. Such distinction, such refinement! He stood, the master, the genius!" And he had never had a lesson in music.

When he died at thirty-nine he had made himself a technically excellent musician; within ten years (for his literary life had scarcely begun before he was thirty) <sup>1</sup>he had fitted himself to give lectures on the English novel, Shakespeare and old English poets; he <sup>2</sup>had written the most original treatise in existence on English verse, equalled, so far as I know that kind of literature, only by the studies of Poe and Coleridge; and <sup>3</sup>he was the unapproachably best American poet of his generation. If ever there was a born genius since Keats, it was Lanier. Let there be no sentimentalizing over him, for he was a man of humour, he spoke always of his difficulties in a manly fashion, and when death strides into his pages it is an honest figure and not a personification of the tuberculosis against which the poet fought to victorious defeat. But if ever lamentation for a poet's death be justifiable, there may well be a cry of pain for the unfinished "Hymns of the Marshes." His voice was growing greater when he ceased to sing, and, like Keats,

his angel's tongue  
Lost half the sweetest song was ever sung.

He bided his time, he wrote little verse, he studied all aspects of his art intensely, patiently, with a religious

conscience. How sure and strong is his growth is wonderfully shown by comparing the two following poems, the first written when he was twenty-four and not published by him, and the second written ten years later, a perfect lyric:

## NIGHT

Fair is the wedded reign of Night and Day.  
Each rules a half of earth with different sway,  
Exchanging kingdoms, East and West, alway.

Like the round pearl that Egypt drunk in wine,  
The sun half sinks in the brimming, rosy brine:  
The wild Night drinks all up: how her eyes shine!

## EVENING SONG

Look off, dear Love, across the sallow sands,  
And mark yon meeting of the sun and sea,  
How long they kiss in sight of all the lands.  
Ah! longer, longer, we.

Now in the sea's red vintage melts the sun,  
As Egypt's pearl dissolved in rosy wine,  
And Cleopatra night drinks all. 'Tis done,  
Love, lay thine hand in mine.

Come forth, sweet stars, and comfort heaven's heart;  
Glimmer, ye waves, round else unlighted sands.  
O night! divorce our sun and sky apart,  
Never our lips, our hands.

Yet it is not for what he might have done but for what he did that the impartial assessment of time will sum his merits. It is humane to remember that he wrote "Sunrise"

the year before he died, when he was too ill to eat and his temperature was at 104; then it is well to remove all the cross lights of biography and stand face to face with his "Sunrise," a poem magnificent in conception, perfect in workmanship, ultimate poetry. The following lines are the close of the poem:

Good morrow, lord Sun!

With several voice, with ascription one,  
The woods and the marsh and the sea and my soul  
Unto thee, whence the glittering stream of all morrows doth roll,  
Cry good and past-good and most heavenly morrow, lord Sun!

O Artisan born in the purple,— Workman Heat,—  
Parter of passionate atoms that travail to meet  
And be mixed in the death-cold oneness, — innermost Guest  
At the marriage of elements, — fellow of publicans, — blest  
King in the blouse of flame, that loiterest o'er  
The idle skies yet labourest fast evermore, —  
Thou, in the fine forge-thunder, thou, in the heat  
Of the heart of man, thou Motive, — Labourer Heat:  
Yea, Artist, thou, of whose art yon sea's all news,  
With his inshore greens and manifold mid-sea blues,  
Pearl-glint, shell-tint, ancientest, perfectest hues  
Ever shaming the maidens, — lily and rose  
Confess thee, and each mild flame that glows  
In the clarified virginal bosoms of stones that shine.

It is thine, it is thine:

Thou chemist of storms, whether driving the winds a-swirl  
Or a-flicker the subtler essences polar that whirl  
In the magnet earth, — yea, thou with a storm for a heart,  
Rent with debate, many-spotted with question, part  
From part oft sundered, yet ever a globéd light,



Yet ever the artist, ever more large and bright  
Than the eye of man may avail of: — manifold One,  
I must pass from thy face, I must pass from the face of the Sun:  
Old Want is awake and agag, every wrinkle a-frown;  
The worker must pass to his work in the terrible town:  
But I fear not, nay, and I fear not the thing to be done;  
I am strong with the strength of my lord the Sun:  
How dark, how dark soever the race that needs be run,  
    I am lit with the Sun.

Oh, never the mast-high run of the seas  
    Of traffic shall hide thee,  
Never the hell-coloured smoke of the factories  
    Hide thee,  
Never the reek of time's fen-politics  
    Hide thee,  
And ever my heart through the night shall with knowledge  
    abide thee,  
And ever by day shall my spirit, as one that hath tried thee,  
    Labour, at leisure, in art, — till yonder beside thee  
    My soul shall float, friend Sun,  
    The day being done.

A blood brother to Lanier's "Sunrise" is Francis Thompson's "Ode to the Setting Sun," and I know not a third which so is closely its kin. These poems have much in common, opulence, splendour of metaphor and an amazing virtuosity in metrical matters which in turn allies them with Swinburne, from whom in thought they are, however, as remote as poets can be. If Thompson did not know the poems of Lanier, it is a case of predetermined affinities which the accidents of circumstance cheated of the earthly fulfilment of meeting. Have they some common earlier

master that I do not know? Or is the identity of these powerful metaphors less striking than I find it?

THOMPSON: Whether man's heart or life it be which yields  
Thee Harvest, must thy harvest fields  
Be dunged with rotten death?

LANIER: Mulched with unsavory death,  
Grow, Soul! unto such white estate,  
That virginal-prayerful art shall be thy breath,  
Thy work, thy fate.

One other resemblance resides in their work, in their convictions, the fresh vigour they have given to the symbols of Christianity which had well nigh perished out of modern poetry, blighted by the ugliness of sincere but graceless hymn writers and other devotees whom the pagan muses had abandoned in despair. And both use the symbols rather for their beauty than for their religious import.

To say at once the worst that can be said of either of them, both Thompson and Lanier are subject to the same temptation, or they are driven to the brink of the same danger, and both triumphantly avoid falling into the abyss where poetry ceases and mere "metricism" begins. They are both so abundant in fancy and overflowed with metaphors, and withal so adept at playing with measures, that now and again their exuberance and nimbleness almost betray them; but because they are both austere artists and passionately intend what they say, they are saved. It is a danger merely and they tremble on the verge of it. One would gladly strike out of Thompson the too visibly crafty rhymes

of such a poem as "To the Dead Cardinal" (strange subject for him to spoil with conceited fantastic versifying!), and one would as gladly prune out some of Lanier's internal rhyming and obvious assonances. In both poets, who are in the main steadied by the solid burden of thought they carry so highly on the breast of song, the fault is due to an intoxication from the sound of words. The best of the Elizabethan and seventeenth-century poets of England were not free from the fantastic, which is a greater pleasure to the skilful verse maker than any but poets realize. In the nineteenth century Swinburne, in the very ecstasy of making new meters and reviving old ones, flies sometimes on dizzy and purposeless wings, and it may be that the younger poets, Lanier and Thompson, learned from him his less admirable as well as his most admirable lessons in prosody. However, they sin but little and — this is the all-immortalizing distinction — they sin as poets, not as versifiers.

That Lanier was a musician as well as a poet (is there any other professional musician in English poetry?), and that he expressed his theory in "The Science of English Verse," are facts caught at too eagerly by those who would account for some of his most evidently musical arrangements of words. The truth about him, as about all artists, is that his theory followed his art; he was a poet first and a student, or, rather, a professor, of technic afterward. His theory of verse merely codifies, with such technical knowledge as only a musician has, the fact which all poets instinctively know and all true poetry exemplifies, that poetry is, in half its nature, music, and that it consists not of spoken words

but of chanted words. Professional students of prosody who are not poets (and most are not) have applied to ancient and modern poetry a kind of visual mathematics, and they discourse of Greek measures and English as if they were quite different things. But their laws are precisely the same; they are aural laws, determined by the human ear, which is pleased or offended *musically* by all verse, Greek, French, English, or South Sea Island. There is only one law for all music and for all poetry (independent of the explicit meaning necessarily resident in human words), and that law is: if it sounds right, it is right. The counting of feet is superfluous. If they are to be counted at all, Lanier's way is the way to count. The principles he expounds were known to the ear that first heard Homer. Lanier's verse, being true to English poetry, to the effects of English words on the ear, would probably have been what it is if he had never been an instructor and a technically capable musician and had never expounded his principles. Indeed, if he had been free to write poetry, he would not have written "The Science of English Verse." A professor cannot earn his salary by reading original poetry to a class, but he can earn it by lecturing on the science of verse.

All true artists know the grammar of their art thoroughly, not merely with such practitioner's knowledge as a carpenter has of geometry, but with the highest kind of theoretic intelligence, for artists have the best of human minds and are the final speculators about the laws which they obey. Any great novelist could take a month off and write a book about "the art of fiction," but few novelists put themselves to

so much trouble, because they are busy writing novels, and therefore the making of books of theory is left in the less capable hands of critics who would fain be literary men but cannot, to save their souls, write novels. Wagner has not time to write a school-master's treatise on harmony, and such a treatise would probably bore Chopin to tears. Lanier is not more theoretic than other poets. He was simply so circumstanced that to keep his head up as a lecturer he made a book about poetry when he would unquestionably have preferred to give his energy to writing poetry.

All modern poets have been overwhelmed by the beauty of ancient poets; they have fed on the classics, sometimes assimilating them so thoroughly as to build new tissue of the divine nutriment, sometimes, far too often, trailing an undigested pseudo-classicism across their pages. The very modern poets have at once a double resource and a double burden, for they have both the very ancient poets and the tremendous body of poetry in living languages, on which to feed and by which to kill themselves. It is a very striking quality of Lanier that he thoroughly assimilates his masters. He does not mix Shakespeare with Lanier but renews a Shakespearian phrase, treating the Elizabethan as a great thing in nature from which to draw metaphors. To put it another way, he does not lean upon Shakespeare; he does not merely reflect a moonlight beauty from great poets, like those rhymsters who get a kind of borrowed sweetness into their work by writing sonnets to Shelley.

Lanier's Shakespearian metaphors sound poetic and not bookish.

Old Hill! old hill! thou gashed and hairy Lear  
Whom the divine Cordelia of the year,  
E'en pitying Spring, will vainly strive to cheer.

Again, of the mocking-bird (which Lanier by a splendid revolt has finally put on his rightful seat, supplanting the European tyrants, nightingale and skylark):

How may the death of that dull insect be  
The life of yon trim Shakspeare on the tree?

If haply thou, O Desdemona Morn,  
Shouldst call along the curving sphere, "Remain  
Dear Night, sweet Moor."

Over the monstrous shambling sea,  
Over the Caliban sea,  
Bright Ariel cloud, thou lingerest:  
Oh, wait, oh, wait in the warm red West —  
Thy Prospero I'll be.

Selection does him wrong by false emphasis, and the foregoing may give the impression that he is overfond of literary allusion. But the quotations I give are all there are of the kind. The purpose of quoting them is to suggest that Lanier was in a sense a fresh unschooled discoverer of the poets. They did not become stale with class-room familiarity while he was young; he loved them as part of nature, as Keats discovered and loved Chapman and Spenser. How far he was from abject worship of his poet-heroes is



shown in "The Crystal," in which is wrought out, with telling phrases that are marvels of criticism, the bold and refreshing idea that all the masters of song, Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, have much to be forgiven. That is a great poem in which a poet adequately praises another, in which he does not droop upon a greater strength, but stands, for one song's duration at least, the equal of his adored. Such poem is that "To Our Mocking-Bird," where the bird and Keats are identified and the Cat and Death are rebuked together.

Lanier, like all his race of poets, sang praises to his fathers in melody. Yet he does not smell of the library. He is a poet of nature and of things, of the meaning of central present things that harry and strengthen the heart of man. In "Corn" for once an American poet strode into our splendid native golden fields and sang what his eyes saw, and deeper, what the harvests of the fields can be for man. "The Symphony," in which the instruments he knew so well are soundingly suggested, is no mere interplay of melodies, but the cry of the old-new spirit of brotherhood against the debauchery of trade. By it Lanier becomes one of the goodly band of modern men dissatisfied with man's violations of man, and his voice is strong enough to admit him to the still smaller band of poets who are the voices of the present life, of these very times — with Morris and Whitman, whom, alas, he did not like! Oddly enough, he, the devotee of pure music, dared the historic theme which so many Americans have tried, ever since the absurd Columbiads of the early years of the nation, and in the "Psalm of the West"

he did make a chant of America and Freedom which has in its short compass something like epic vision and is, if not the noblest of Lanier, far above most patriotic verse, and artistically excellent.

Lanier stands alone in that era of American poetry which is chiefly marked by a false post-Tennysonism, an era of nicely made lyrics that have neither passion nor an individual sense of beauty. There are to-day signs of something better, nay, distinguished specimens of something better, in such work as Mrs. Marks's "The Singing Man," which it is a pleasure to name again, and in Mr. R. H. Schauffler's "Scum o' the Earth." If Lanier had no equal contemporaries, he may have successors, for when an age is shuddering on its first gray verge and its day-facts lie in the future, it is permitted to be hopeful for it.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sidney Lanier was born at Macon, Georgia, February 3, 1842. He died at Lynn, North Carolina, September 7, 1881. He learned as a boy to play several musical instruments, which instead of delighting his friends and parents, alarmed them! At the age of eighteen he graduated from Oglethorpe College, a Presbyterian institution in Georgia, which he later called "farcical." In April, 1861, he enlisted in the Confederate Army and served through the war. It is a picturesque fact that he carried his flute with him through battle and imprisonment. The war broke his health, and he was never afterward free from consumption. Until 1872 he was in business and in the practice of law. In 1873 he

settled in Baltimore and supported himself as flute-player in the Peabody Orchestra. He lived the rest of his life in Baltimore, except for vain excursions in quest of health. Some public lectures on literature and some of his poems brought him to the notice of President D. C. Gilman, who appointed him lecturer on English Literature at Johns Hopkins University. In 1867 he married Mary Day.

His books are: *Tiger Lilies: A Novel*, 1867; *Florida: Its Scenery, History and Climate*, 1876; *Poems*, 1876; *The Boy's Froissart*, 1878; *The Science of English Verse*, 1880; *The Boy's King Arthur*, 1880; *The Boy's Mabinogion*, 1881; *The Boy's Percy*, 1882; *The English Novel and the Principles of Its Development*, 1883; *Poems*, 1884, 1891; *Letters*, 1899; *Shakespeare and His Forerunners*, 1902; *Poem Outlines*, 1908.

The *Life of Lanier in American Men of Letters* is by Edwin Mims.

## CHAPTER XVII

### HENRY JAMES

THERE is a sort of poetic justice in the fact that Mr. James, a fine and exacting critic, should have evoked from other critics an interesting and provocative variety of opinion. Both for him and against him, people whose business it is to write about literature, have put their best brains forward; those who attend to him at all sit on the edge of their chairs, and thereby agree, however otherwise they may differ, that they are in the presence of an unusual mind. He is already a celebrated argument, and there are accepted *clichés* of him, some complimentary, some not quite just. In the minor humours of the press, undoubtedly vulgar, as he would hasten to tell us if he had occasion to animadvert on it, his name is, like Browning's, synonymous with obscurity, with all that suggests height of brow and a liking for the *raffiné*. It is not quite appropriate that such notoriety should attend the work of a man who has pursued his career in modest retirement, who has never stood out and fought for his public, like Ibsen, and who has not been rewarded by the popularity which helps to make notoriety palatable. He has won and held a small public, creating in it a taste for himself, as Meredith did, and being, like Meredith again, a fine example of the man of letters who follows his

own course and lets the people talk. The people, or at least the critics, have talked, whether they have read him or not. In a way some of his friendliest critics have done less good than harm, for they have a habit of assuming that to understand him one has to be a very unusually intelligent person, which is like the fundamental fallacy of the Browning societies.

Mr. James is an American only in the sense that he was born and passed part of his youth in this country. For forty years he has lived in Europe, and he does not know much about America. It is a visitor and not a native who writes "The American Scene." The characters in his novels are individuals selected out of their habitual environment and without much of any soil clinging to their boots. The world is small nowadays, and since Mr. James does not deal with rooted people, but with persons, whatever their nationality, who are in social circumstances which permit them to travel freely, he carries his country under his hat: and he can study it just as well in London as in Florence, in Rome as in Chicago. His expatriation is really less significant than Washington Irving's long sojourn abroad.

His attitude, however, is rather British than American. For he takes British people more for granted. Any American reader feels at home with the English characters in English novels. Miss Austen's country families, the people of Trollope, of Mr. Arnold Bennett, of Mr. H. G. Wells, sit beside our fires and talk and smoke, make love and trouble, just like our neighbours. But when an American character walks into an English novel, the novelist infallibly tells you

in as many different ways as he can think of that *this* is an American. Though the character may do nothing but look at his watch or flirt with a girl, behave in a quite ordinary way, the novelist gets uneasy and begins to hunt for national differences. American novelists do the same sort of thing. Mr. Howells always takes American people for granted. But if an English woman appears on the scene, he lets you know that she is English, not merely by stating the plain fact but by comments and inklings of national peculiarities. So marked is this tendency that Mr. John M. Robertson, the Scotch critic, notes and especially enjoys Mr. Howells's attitude toward the English. To be sure, in their "international" novels Mr. James and Mr. Howells make comments on both English and American characteristics. They reveal themselves by what they take for granted. Judged by this sort of evidence, Mr. James "gives himself away" to an American as being British.

We cannot, however, yield him from our poverty to the riches of the English novel. Moreover, the important thing is not so much the settling of a boundary dispute as the fact that Mr. James, ignorant of the American at home, fails to make the social contrasts in which he is so much interested. His chief interest, of course, is not in social backgrounds, but in individuals whom he minutely and faithfully studies, but when he does try to make a plunge into a national depth, he merely goes through a paper hoop; he is in the same atmosphere, not a different one.

In "The Wings of the Dove" he brings the secondary heroine, the dove herself, from America. She might just



as well have been born in an English city — wealth, hair, purity, intensity, oddity, fragility and all. Her companion, Mrs. Stringham, the lady from Boston, may be “typically” Bostonian; but there is nothing about her, *essential to the story*, that might not have been born in Liverpool or Edinburgh. Because Mr. James makes a good deal of her past, there must have been some feeling on his part that he was bringing together, significantly, specimens of different social habits; otherwise he surely would not have strained probabilities as he does in the meetings and acquaintanceships that he asks us to accept. An English journalist meets in New York a woman whose bosom friend is a Boston woman. The Boston woman went to school in Switzerland with the English aunt who controls the destinies of the girl to whom previously the English journalist is engaged.

Why this unnecessary internationalism? The contrast between Kate Croy’s competent wordly intellect and the “residuary innocence of spirit” of Milly Theale is simply a contrast between two different sorts of girls, who might have been born in the same city, any city from Manchester to Melbourne. The intellectual girl lets herself go in a kind of desperate extravagance, because the innocent girl does not quite follow her and so causes her some irritation. “She went at them just now, these sources of irritation, with an amused energy that it would have been open to Milly to regard as cynical and that was nevertheless called for — as to this the other was distinct — by the way that in certain connections the American mind broke down. It seemed at least — the American mind as sitting there

thrilled and dazzled in Milly — not to understand English society without a separate confrontation with all the cases.” Well, the intellectual portrait of “our young women” is wonderful; you can see and hear those two girls together. But it is one girl’s mind and another girl’s mind, not American and English mind as embodied in two specimens. In the foregoing passage it is not Mr. James but the English girl who imputes Americanism to Milly’s mind. But it seems to be his idea too, and he notes the same thing elsewhere when he is writing more evidently without the intervention of an observant *dramatis persona*. Much of Mr. James’s internationalism is an invention peculiar to him. Almost everything he alleges about a character seems true to human nature, but he does not successfully nationalize one and another characteristic of the human mind. It may be that Daisy Miller was a moral fish out of water and tragically perishing (of fever, be it noted, not of innocence or moral contradictions), but she was, quite understandably, *that* kind of girl, and not inevitably a compatriot of Mr. Howells’s “Lydia Blood” or Mr. Dreiser’s “Jennie Gerhardt” or Mrs. Wharton’s “Lily Bart.”

If Mr. Newman in “The American” had been an Englishman, the story would have gone just as well. He does not do or say or think or possess a single namable thing which necessitated his having been born in the United States. Whether the Bellegarde family is recognizably and untransplantably French, only a Frenchman can tell us. But it is worth remarking that whenever an English-writing novelist wishes to work into a story some dark crime behind

marvellous manners and fine breeding, he gets French or Italian or Spanish people to play the villain for him. Except Meredith, who satirizes the English view of the French in "Beauchamp's Career," the moment an English novelist casually informs you that one of his characters had a French mother or that his name was Sorrel but his grandfather was a wine merchant named Sorolya, you know right away that he will commit some crime before the book is done. National characteristics are mainly superstitious, held by aliens and not recognized by natives or by the thoroughly adopted. Newman has not a characteristic which is not American, for nothing is unAmerican, not even a preference for champagne without ice. What is recorded of him by Mr. James as being peculiarly American does not strike at least one American as being so. For example, Newman suspects the Bellegarde family, and he talks about them to his friend Mrs. Tristram.

"She is wicked, she is an old sinner."

"What is her crime?" asked Mrs. Tristram.

"I shouldn't wonder if she had murdered some one — all from a sense of duty, of course."

"How can you be so dreadful?" sighed Mrs. Tristram.

"I am not dreadful. I am speaking of her favourably."

"Pray what will you say when you want to be severe?"

"I shall keep my severity for some one else — for the marquis. There's a man I can't swallow, mix the drink as I will."

"And what has he done?"

"I can't quite make out; it is something dreadfully bad,

something mean and underhand, and not redeemed by audacity, as his mother's misdemeanours may have been. If he has never committed murder, he has at least turned his back and looked the other way while some one else was committing it.'

"In spite of the invidious hypothesis, which must be taken for nothing more than an example of the capricious play of 'American humour,' Newman did his best to maintain an easy and friendly style of communication with M. de Bellegarde."

What Newman says will have to be taken as something more than an example of "the capricious play of American humour," or as something quite other than American humour. A human being from any part of the world might talk that way. What Newman says is not distinctly American in substance, in tone, in turn of phrase. And there is one other thing the matter with it: it is not humorous. It is dead in earnest. Newman is seriously troubled, and Mr. James so represents him at the moment and in the event. But "our author" has "Americanisms" on the brain and sees them when they do not exist.

Mr. James has lost what his brother calls "connection with the open air of human nature," human nature in its large common aspects. Not that he is untrue to human nature. He is a remarkable penetrating student of it within a limited range of types and in social surroundings that are very narrow though they embrace half the cities of Europe. But he has not a broad knowledge of people. His humanity is sometimes intense and exquisite; it is not very hospitable.

He goes deep into some individuals, not deep into society. For all his unique originality, he is a conventional man of the world, as conventional as Thackeray. He is distinctly not a philosopher. As man of letters, professional craftsman, he is a thorough workman; as an interpreter of human life in its main issues he is a dilettante, never even betraying that he understands or has ever questioned where Newman, Verver and Miss Theale got their money and how, or what supports the newspaper whose brazen reporter is so annoying, what the newspaper means as a social force, beyond the fact that a journalist is importunate in the presence of gentlemen.

Mr. James is not a snob, because he has too much candour and good sense, but he has never strayed imaginatively outside his own comfortable cultivated class. Some of his persons are uncultivated and some are impecunious, but they are the poor and the vulgar of the upper crust, not the real poor, the real common majority. He does not know as much as any one of fifteen younger novelists in England and America knows about *all* the principal economic and social varieties to be found in a single town. He is almost morbid on the subject of vulgarity. It is a fine trait to dislike vulgarity, but it is not altogether wholesome to feel obliged to name it as vulgar every time one comes anywhere near it. Indeed it is a kind of vulgarity to be so uneasy about it; it is not polite to flaunt one's wealth, and it is not the largest most natural kind of elegance to betray a continuous consciousness of inelegance: it is simpler to let things and people tell their own story, unlabelled,

and to assume that the reader will know that this style of speech on that style of housefurnishing is vulgar or is not.

Mr. James has two technical defects, one of style, the other of method. The defect of style is due to his habit of writing with his eye and his mind instead of with his ear. His great mind saves him perfectly when he is writing in his own person; but too often when he makes a character speak, he equips it with a peculiarly Henry-James sentence, a fault not unlike Browning's, but more pardonable in a poet than in a writer of realistic fiction. Says Kate Croy: "We needn't, I grant you, in that case wait." With all due deference to the author of her wonderful being, what she would have said is: "I grant you that in that case we needn't wait." Folks talk that way in America, and (one stands on the testimony of other novelists) in England. Of Robert Assingham, a good straightforward military man, Mr. James says, "He disengaged, he would be damned if he didn't — they were both phrases he repeatedly used — his responsibility." Now he would be damned, no doubt; that sounds right; but fancy his saying, "I disengage my responsibility!" To disengage one's responsibility is what a very full-worded man of letters does, but not what a blunt and none too clever military man does. "'She'll depreciate to you,' Mrs. Assingham added 'your property.'" That is, in spoken English, "'She'll depreciate your property to you,' added Mrs. Assingham." "Run down your property," would be still better, more life-like. Mr. Verver, an American business man, is the hero of the following hiccoughing row of phrases: "'Well, I mean, too,' he had gone



on, 'that we haven't, no doubt, enough, the sense of difficulty.'"

The James sentence, as a rule, will be found, upon scrutiny, to contain, admirably, each thing in its place, the entire idea; and whatever another writer, more naturally following the path of least resistance, which, on the whole, is that path normally pursued by the human mind, would tag on, as who should say, as an afterthought, he cunningly, and true to an ideally more perfect intellectual arrangement, inserts, or more properly builds in, so that, in fine, to the English language is wonderfully restored, in him, some of the effect, so long lost, of the periodic sentence. But people don't talk that way, even the rather intellectual and delightfully clever human beings that he assembles.

The other defect, that of method, is the vice of his virtue. He is critic of human life. He devises an interesting situation and then stands off and explains it. The good effect of this, which no other novelist quite so curiously affords, is a warrant of intellectual integrity, as if he wanted the reader to watch the story with him, discover things simultaneously with the author. The difficulty is that having assumed that he does not know all about it, but is a spectator too, he then, without any new action, gesture or speech to furnish new knowledge, plunges into the midmost mind of the character and tells things that are working there which only a god could know. When Daniel Defoe, narrating external events, professes ignorance of something, he plays a pretty game with the reader's credulity; for the reader immediately claps the positive on the negative and concludes that what

Defoe *does* tell he *does* know all about. This device is a good one to establish verisimilitude in an autobiographical narrative. But it obviously is not successful, applied to a novel in which the author deals with psychological processes known only to the omniscient creator. "What she was thinking of I am unable to say. I hazard the supposition," etc. The reader's inner self retorts, "My dear sir, you made her; if you do not know, you ought to, or there is no use pretending that you knew all you told us a few pages back." "We confess," says our author, "to having perhaps read into the scene, prematurely, a critical character that took longer to develop." That sounds like candour and ought to strengthen the illusion that the writer is telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth as he knows it. But its effect is quite otherwise; it disturbs credulity, ruffles illusion, as when the theatre drop with the castle painted on it wavers in a gust from the wings.

Anything is bad art which makes a reader say: "This is not so." And Mr. James frequently does things in the talk of his characters and in his own comments which spoil the show. In "The Turn of the Screw" he takes the governess's story out of her lips and retranslates it into an unconvincing idiom, so that what ought to be a great tragic parable, a ghost story even more terribly significant than Ibsen's "Ghosts," misses fire; the more so in that the very nature of the story gives hostages to probability at the outset. The plain fact is that many of Mr. James's stories do not sound true. They are the work of a critic, and they are interesting chiefly to those who like to follow

with their intellects the wonderful process of his intellect. This is especially the case with his later books, which have, perhaps unfortunately, obscured those that made his reputation. The first books, "Roderick Hudson," "The Princess Casamassima," "The Portrait of a Lady," "The American," are straightaway and simple.

How came it that the critic ran away with the novelist? One reason, it is safe to guess, is that he lacks narrative material; his mind is better than the intrinsic value of the subject he deals with; he says highly intelligent and wise things about relatively unimportant situations. The great novelists, voluminous as they are, make you feel that they are telling only part of what they know, that there is a great life behind them. Mr. James is like a great scientific mind imprisoned with a few bugs.

They are interesting bugs and he says wonderful things about them. So long as the door is shut and one cannot hear the clamour of life outside, one is content to study them with him, unflaggingly fascinated. The minute, intricate fidelity of his observation is such that it taxes the full capacity of the reader's attention. He is a chronicler of mental processes when there is process, and an analyst of stationary mental states. A good deal of the human intellect is comparatively static, so that his work is often mere exposition, unfolding rather than progressing. It is a treat to watch him trace an idea, to follow it as it swims up, touched here by a motive, there by a circumstance, until it finally takes shape on the lips of a character. Because of his large if not predominant interest in the minds of his

people, he is called a "psychologist." He is a psychologist only so far as he is true to human nature. All true portraits of human beings are psychologically true, the story of Joseph and his brethren, no less than one of Mr. James's novels. In most stories the motives are simplified and the actions elaborated. In Mr. James the action is often subordinated to the meanings and the motives of it. Nine tenths of what can be said about human beings by a sincere man seeking the truth is plain, self-evident; literature and life have already made it familiar, so that it is instantly recognized when it is met again. The other tenth is complex and cannot be briefly explained, and it is with this tenth that Mr. James is eagerly engaged. Hence to people who do not receive a complicated idea, Mr. James seems obscure. In point of fact, he is a paragon of clarity, sharp, precise and accurate with the kind of verbal justice which is characteristic of the French. He is obscure only with the unavoidable obscurity that attends saying a new and difficult thing. It is easier to narrate that a man killed his wife or put on his gloves, than it is to say just how Maggie Verver met the stronger woman who menaced her married life. Once you get the total development of one of his characters, you feel that you have passed all round it and proved that it is a real entity occupying space; all the details have been touched in, so that complete knowledge finally closes round like a curve whose free ends meet at last and fulfil in a circle.

Aside from the analysis and psychology and all that is forbiddingly intellectual, some of the dramatic scenes in James's novels are remarkable inventions. If the word

“scene” suggests something too motor and theatrical, then say rather, the situations, the human predicaments. To tell one of his plots is hopelessly to spoil him, for his reactions on the plots are what counts. Yet in order to indicate what an original relationship he can devise, let us roughly suggest the situation in “The Golden Bowl.” Maggie Verver is daughter of a rich American art collector. She marries an Italian Prince. Just before the wedding there appears on the scene Charlotte Stant, a friend of Maggie’s. The Prince and Charlotte have been in love but unable to marry because they have not money enough. They have one hour together, unknown to Maggie, in which they go, ostensibly for Charlotte to buy Maggie a wedding present, into a curio shop. They see there a golden bowl, which Charlotte admires. The Prince knows it is cracked. After the wedding of Maggie and the Prince, Mr. Verver, whose daughter has been his intimate companion, is lonely. He proposes to Charlotte and is accepted only after they have telegraphed to Maggie and the Prince for their approval. The Prince and Charlotte are thus thrown together, the Prince and his wife’s stepmother! Maggie has known nothing of their past, but she finds it out, partly through the golden bowl and the curio dealer, whom she stumbles on. That outline, which is too crude even to be an outline, is sufficient to suggest the quadrangular situation, compared to which the familiar triangular situation is child’s play. The working out of the story is, at the lowest possible estimate, a fascinating game of motives; at the best estimate, the one which is worthy of it, it is very noble study of human character.

In his unemotional way Mr. James is a worshipper of what is fine in men and women. He is somewhat timid in handling passion, but he contrives to let you know that it is there, off the stage, but a vital part of the piece. He is not a poet, and that, rather than any conviction of realism, is probably the reason that the decided tendency to the romantic which he showed in his youth has not deepened, but has almost entirely disappeared. Some of his titles, especially the later ones, are as symbolic as Ruskin's, but their symbolism is intellectual, not poetic. They are like all his metaphors, of which he is prolific, analogies contrived by the mind, not the immediately sensational metaphors of the poet's vision. They explain, they elucidate, but they do not flash on the ear or the eye; they are the work of a man whose understanding is great, but whose sense of beauty is not wonderful. His is a critical intelligence turned into fiction, as some undramatic poets turned to drama in Shakespeare's time, because drama was the thing doing. He has not much of what may fairly be called the instinctive gift of narrative. But his unusual intellect and fine artistic conscience have made him an object of intense admiration for his fellow-craftsmen. There are better story tellers, there are several living writers with a more natural ear for style. There is not one whose mind is more interesting to encounter, or who puts more sheer brains into his books.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Henry James was born in New York City, April 15, 1843. He is a brother of William James, the philosopher. He was



educated in Europe and at the Harvard Law School. Since 1869 he has lived in Paris, London, Italy, and other places in Europe.

His principal works are: *A Passionate Pilgrim*, 1875; *Transatlantic Sketches*, 1875; *Roderick Hudson*, 1875; *The American*, 1877; *French Poets and Novelists*, 1878; *The Europeans*, 1878; *Daisy Miller*, 1878; *An International Episode*, 1879; *Life of Hawthorne*, 1879; *A Bundle of Letters*, 1879; *The Madonna of the Future*, 1879; *Confidence*, 1880; *Diary of a Man of Fifty*, 1880; *Washington Square*, 1880; *The Portrait of a Lady*, 1881; *The Siege of London*, 1883; *Portraits of Places*, 1884; *Tales of Three Cities*, 1884; *A Little Tour in France*, 1884; *The Author of Beltraffio*, 1885; *The Bostonians*, 1886; *The Princess Casamassima*, 1886; *Partial Portraits*, 1888; *The Aspern Papers*, 1888; *The Reverberator*, 1888; *A London Life*, 1889; *The Tragic Muse*, 1890; *The Lesson of the Master*, 1892; *The Real Thing*, 1893; *Picture and Text*, 1893; *The Private Life*, 1893; *Essays in London*, 1893; *The Wheel of Time*, 1893; *The Spoils of Poynton*, 1897; *What Maisie Knew*, 1897; *In the Cage*, 1898; *The Two Magics*, 1898; *The Awkward Age*, 1899; *The Soft Side*, 1900; *The Sacred Fount*, 1901; *The Wings of the Dove*, 1903; *The Ambassadors*, 1903; *The Better Sort*, 1903; *William W. Story, and His Friends* 1904; *The Question of Our Speech and The Lesson of Balzac*, 1905; *English Hours*, 1905; *The American Scene*, 1906; *Italian Hours*, 1909; *Julia Bride*, 1909. *The Outcry*, 1912.



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